The Geography of the Peace
East Asia in the Twenty-first Century

The discussion of post–Cold War East Asia has focused on the prospects for regional tension and heightened great power conflict. Some scholars believe that tension will increase because of the relative absence of the three liberal/Kantian sources of peace: liberal democracies, economic interdependence, and multilateral institutions. Realists argue that the rise of China and the resulting power transition will create great power conflict over the restructuring of the regional order. Neorealists point to the emergence of multipolarity and resulting challenges to the peaceful management of the balance of power.1

East Asia has the world’s largest and most dynamic economies as well as great power competition. This combination of economic and strategic importance ensures great power preoccupation with the East Asian balance of power. But great power rivalry is not necessarily characterized by heightened tension, wars, and crises. This article agrees that realist and neorealist variables will contribute to the character of regional conflict, but it stresses that geography can influence structural effects. Although many factors contribute to great power status, including economic development and levels of technology and education, geography determines whether a country has the prerequisites of great power status; it determines which states can be great powers and, thus,


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whether East Asia will be bipolar or multipolar in the twenty-first century. Geography also has two effects on the management of the balance of power. First, it affects the interests of the powers, thus influencing conflict over vital interests. Second, it affects whether a great power relationship is offense dominant or defense dominant, thus determining the severity of conflict from the security dilemma. Geographic and structural incentives can often reinforce each other. But when geography and polarity create countervailing pressures, geography trumps structure.

Nuclear weapons have transformed international politics, not least as deterrents to general war. But the Cold War revealed that in the shadow of nuclear war great power conflict continues over allies, spheres of influence, and natural resources. It also revealed that great powers continue to participate in crises, arms races, and local wars, and to threaten general war. Similarly, nuclear weapons have not eliminated the effect of geography on state behavior.

This article stresses that just as political scientists tried to understand the geography of the future balance of power and the conditions of peace as World War II was drawing to a close, in the aftermath of the Cold War it is important to examine the geography of the twenty-first-century balance of power. The first section of this article argues that despite the prevailing global unipolarity, contemporary East Asia is bipolar, divided into continental and maritime regions. The second section contends that bipolarity is stable because the region’s lesser great powers—Russia and Japan—lack the geopolitical prerequisites to be poles. The third section holds that both China and the United States have the geographic assets to potentially challenge each other and that they are destined to be great power competitors. The fourth section argues that U.S.-China bipolarity is likely to be stable and relatively peaceful; it does so by examining balancing trends in East Asia, the geography-conditioned interests of China and the United States, and the mitigating role of geography on the security dilemma. The final two sections consider the implications for regional order of the conflict over the Spratly Islands, the Korean Peninsula, and Taiwan, and of the potential for a reduced U.S. presence.

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The Great Power Structure of Contemporary East Asia

The post–Cold War global structure is characterized by American unipolarity. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia’s preoccupation with domestic political and economic turmoil and the impoverishment of its military forces, the United States is the world’s sole superpower. But global supremacy does not mean that the United States possesses hegemony in regional politics. Regional structures can diverge from the pattern of the global structure. The analytical distinction between a superpower and a regional power makes this clear. As William Fox noted fifty-five years ago, a superpower is a traditional great power in regions outside its home region, while regional powers “enjoy . . . great-power status,” but its “interests and influence are great in only a single theater of power conflict.” As Kenneth Boulding explained, the “loss of strength gradient” erodes capabilities in distant regions, thus contributing to great power parity. These factors reveal how bipolar or multipolar regional balances of power can coexist in a unipolar global structure. They explain why nineteenth-century Great Britain was a superpower. Britain did not possess hegemony over Europe, but it had great power status in regions other than Europe, earning it the status of a superpower. They also explain why nineteenth-century Britain had superpower status but simultaneously contested for security in multipolar regions outside Europe, such as in East Asia, where Japan and Russia challenged British interests.

East Asia is bipolar because China is not a rising power but an established regional power. The United States is not a regional hegemon, but shares with China great power status in the balance of power. From the early 1970s to the end of the Cold War there were elements of a “strategic triangle” in East Asia composed of the United States, Russia, and China. The collapse of Soviet

power ushered in not U.S. hegemony, but bipolarity composed of the remaining two powers—China and the United States. Indeed, China was the major strategic beneficiary in East Asia of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Wherever there had been Soviet influence in a third country, China filled the vacuum. This was the case on the Korean Peninsula, where Sino-Soviet competition in North Korea was succeeded by Chinese dominance. The Soviet withdrawal from Vietnam transformed Indochina into a Chinese sphere of influence.

The post–Cold War bipolar regional structure is characterized by Chinese dominance of mainland East Asia and U.S. dominance of maritime East Asia. In Northeast Asia North Korea’s location on the Chinese border and its strategic and economic isolation yield China hegemony over North Korea’s economy and security. On the Sino-Russian border China enjoys conventional military superiority. Moscow’s inability to pay its soldiers, fund its weapons industries, and maintain its military infrastructure has weakened the material capabilities and the morale of the Russian army. Moscow cannot dominate domestic minority movements and numerous smaller neighbors while contending with the better-funded and better-trained Chinese army. China enjoys similar advantages over Russia regarding the new border states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and its economic presence in this region yields additional advantages. China dominates mainland Southeast Asia. Burma has been a de facto Chinese protectorate since World War II. Chinese regional influence expanded following the withdrawal of U.S. forces from mainland Southeast Asia in 1975, when Thailand shifted from alignment with the United States to alignment with China. Only Beijing had the credibility to offset Soviet


and Vietnamese threats to Thai security. Following the Soviet withdrawal from Vietnam, Hanoi accepted China’s terms for peace in Cambodia. Cambodia then developed close relations with China, so that Beijing was content to work with the erstwhile Vietnamese “puppet regime.”

Thus by 1991 China had achieved dominance over mainland East Asia. The only exception is South Korea’s alliance with the United States. But even here the situation is ambiguous. Because Washington is Seoul’s ally and possesses bases in South Korea, it dominates South Korea’s strategic calculus. But by the mid-1990s Beijing and Seoul had developed close strategic ties. The two countries share considerable concern for Japanese military potential. Moreover, it is clear that Seoul is pursuing strategic hedging by developing strategic ties with China in preparation for possible U.S. reconsideration of its commitment to South Korea. In addition, in 1997 China was South Korea’s third largest export market and the largest target of South Korean direct foreign investment.

The United States dominates maritime East Asia. The U.S. navy lost its bases in Thailand in 1975 and withdrew from its Philippine bases in 1991, but these losses did not weaken either absolute or relative U.S. naval power. In many respects, the United States had secured bases in East Asia because of the poverty of its allies, which could not build and maintain air and naval facilities. For the United States to shoulder the burden, it insisted on possessing the facilities. Now excellent air and naval facilities exist throughout Southeast Asia, so that the U.S. navy is interested in “places, not bases.” Washington has access agreements for naval facilities in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei.


Because other powers do not have access to facilities in any of these countries, do not have aircraft carriers, and do not have land-based aircraft that can project power into the region, the U.S. navy dominates maritime Southeast Asia, including the critical shipping lanes connecting East Asia with the Middle East.

Northeast Asia is vastly more complicated than Southeast Asia because Northeast Asian land-based aircraft are within range of important maritime theaters. Nonetheless, the combination of U.S. bases in Japan and superior U.S. air capabilities ensures U.S. dominance of the Northeast Asian naval theater. Despite deployment on the perimeters of Northeast Asia’s maritime zones, Chinese aircraft cannot challenge U.S. aircraft in any theater, including over mainland China. Whereas the United States is continuing to develop more advanced aircraft for the twenty-first century, Beijing will rely on Russia’s 1970s’ generation Su-27 aircraft as the backbone of its early twenty-first-century air force. China is vulnerable to air combat with U.S. aircraft in the East China Sea and the Sea of Japan, and the resulting U.S. air superiority provides for American naval superiority in Northeast Asia.

Rising Powers in East Asia?

Out of the ashes of the Cold War emerged a bipolar East Asia. It is stable because geopolitical conditions determine that no power can challenge it. The only candidates to become poles are Russia and Japan. But given geographic constraints, neither can challenge bipolarity. They are powerful countries that affect the regional balance of power, but they cannot become poles. Rather, they will remain second-class great powers, or, in Randall Schweller’s term, “lesser great powers,” whose security depends on cooperation with a pole.

Committee, U.S. Senate, March 2, 1994, which includes a discussion of “places” and “bases”; statement of Admiral Joseph W. Prueher, Committee on National Security, U.S. House of Representatives, March 4, 1998. Note also that Washington has reached a status-of-forces agreement with the Philippines, the first step toward access to facilities at Subic Bay. See the statement in Manila by U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen, January 14, 1998. The most recent agreement with Singapore is reported in Jane’s Defence Weekly, November 18, 1998, p. 15.


SUCCUMING TO THE WEATHER: RUSSIA AS A NORTHEAST ASIA POWER

Despite Russia’s presence in Northeast Asia, its status as a regional pole has been tenuous and rare, primarily because of the inhospitable geography separating the Russian Far East from western Russia. Russians have never migrated east in large numbers. Although the southeast sector of the Far East can sustain agriculture, its isolation from Russia’s population and industrial bases obstructs development of the infrastructure needed to support population and financial transfers. Russia’s ultimately fruitless effort to establish reliable rail links with the Far East reveals the obstacles posed by the cold and barren Russian heartland.\(^{15}\) The result has been an enduring lack of manpower and natural resources, both of which are necessary to sustain a large Russian military presence in the North Pacific and to avoid dependency on foreign resources.

One exception to this trend was Russian expansion into the Russian Far East and Manchuria during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet this success reflected the anomaly of Chinese weakness rather than any norm of Russian strength. At times, Russian forces were so overextended that had China knowledge of Russia’s situation it could have easily reversed St. Petersburg’s advances. At other times, China’s preoccupation with other powers compelled it to acquiesce to Russian occupation of its territory.\(^{16}\) But despite China’s weakness, the Russian border remained open to Chinese migration, and the Far East economy remained dependent on foreign suppliers. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, 80 percent of the civilians in Vladivostok were Chinese and Korean. In 1877 the Pacific Squadron, to avoid total dependence on foreign merchants in Vladivostok, purchased coal in San Francisco and used repair facilities in Japan. In 1885 it still depended on imported coal as well as winter anchorages in Nagasaki. As late as 1912, Russians were a bare majority of the Vladivostok population.\(^{17}\) These resource and logistical difficulties offset Russia’s material advantage vis-à-vis Japan during the 1904–05 Russo-Japanese War. St. Petersburg could not resist Japan’s naval blockade

\(^{15}\) For an enlightening discussion of Russian frustration in trying to overcome the geographic obstacles to expansion into the Far East, see Walter A. McDougall, *Let the Sea Make a Noise: A History of the North Pacific from Magellan to MacArthur* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).


of Port Arthur by using land routes to resupply its naval and ground forces, making it easy for the Japanese army to land and defeat the Russian army. The Japanese navy used its readily available harbors, supply depots, and coal supplies to destroy the Russian Pacific and Baltic Sea Fleets.18

Russia’s strategic position in Northeast Asia quickly eroded during World War I and following the 1917 revolution and ensuing civil war. As late as 1925 Chinese controlled the retail trade in much of the Far East, and Japanese firms dominated the region’s banking and shipping and controlled 90 percent of the fisheries. In 1920 Japanese forces moved into northern Sakhalin, withdrawing in 1925 only after the Soviet Union agreed to unfettered Japanese access to Sakhalin’s natural resources. The only Russian/Soviet military victory against a major power in East Asia during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century was in 1939 against Japan at Nomoham. The Soviet army was not fighting in East Asia, however, but on the border of Manchuria and Outer Mongolia in Inner Asia, where Moscow enjoyed better lines of communication and resources, and where Japanese forces were overextended and faced logistical problems. Tokyo could have overcome these obstacles, but in 1939 its forces were fighting a major war with Chinese forces deep in southern China while contending with deteriorating U.S.-Japan relations. Japanese leaders thus assigned Nomoham secondary priority. They knowingly refused to supply the local forces with the minimal manpower and matériel required to contend with Soviet forces and instead unsuccessfully counseled local military leaders to cede ground rather than fight. Given Japan’s preoccupation with more pressing issues, the Soviet Union did not need great power capabilities to encourage Japanese caution and to defeat the isolated and unprepared Japanese forces.19

Not until the late 1950s did Moscow begin to establish a strong presence in the Far East. In the 1970s it revived the Baikal-Amur Railway project, but it was never fully operative through the end of the Soviet Union. In the 1980s Moscow tried to establish a great power military presence in East Asia. It used Vladivostok to develop its Pacific Fleet and deployed forty-five divisions in the Sino-Soviet border region. But Vladivostok remained isolated from the


western Soviet Union. The Pacific Fleet relied on the vulnerable railway system and on equally vulnerable sea and air routes for supplies, making it the most exposed Soviet fleet. And the maritime geography of Northeast Asia continued to plague Soviet access to blue water: offensive action by the U.S. Seventh Fleet could devastate Soviet naval forces before they could leave the Sea of Japan. Although the Pacific Fleet never achieved parity with the U.S. Seventh Fleet and Moscow maintained only about half of its Far East divisions at full strength, the burden of Soviet Far East deployments significantly added to the overexpansion that contributed to the demise of the Soviet Empire.20

Contemporary Russian presence in the Far East is closer to the historical norm. The Far East economy is considerably poorer than the Russian economy east of the Urals. Moscow cannot patrol its perimeters, and its borders can be as porous to Chinese migration and trade as they were for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. China’s stronger commercial presence challenges the economic integration of the Far East with the rest of Russia.21 In short, now that China is no longer weak and internally divided, it enjoys geopolitical advantages over Russia as the result of its large population and industrial centers as well as its agriculture resources in Northeast Asia. In these more “normal” circumstances, Russia is, as it usually has been, a “wanna-be” great power.

Even should Moscow stabilize its authority and the economy greatly improve, Russia will not devote the resources necessary to become a pole in East Asia. Rather, it will focus its limited resources first on the former republics of the Soviet Union and then on the expanded U.S. presence in Eastern Europe. Northeast Asia will likely be of third importance. Moreover, Russia’s geography will remain a major obstacle to its presence in Northeast Asia. China

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would once again have to fragment and Russia consolidate for Moscow to enjoy the relative advantages leading to expanded power. But it is far more likely that Russia will remain divided than it is that China will break up.

**JAPAN: ISLAND NATION, SECOND-RANK POWER**

Japan also faces geographical constraints. But for Japan the problem is not weather or domestic infrastructure, but size. For Japan to transform its economic and technological capabilities into great power military capabilities will require more than ambition. To become a regional pole, Japan must have the resources to support self-reliant regionwide military deployments. Yet dependency, rather than self-sufficiency, is the rule in Japanese history.

Throughout the twentieth century Tokyo has been acutely aware that Japan's indigenous resources are insufficient to eliminate dependency on great power rivals. A major factor in Japanese interwar expansionism and its drive for regional hegemony was its search for economic autonomy. By the start of World War II, Japan had occupied Korea, much of China, and most of Southeast Asia before ultimately being turned back by the United States. But Japanese successes resemble Russian great power successes insofar as Tokyo benefited from a unique and nonreplicable great power environment. Greater Japanese relative power reflected the declining capabilities of other powers rather than Japanese development of the resources necessary to catch up to its rivals.

The early twentieth century was a propitious time for Japan to begin its expansionist drive. Not only was China suffering from internal divisions, but the region's dominant power, Great Britain, was experiencing relative decline. No longer capable of maintaining its two-power naval standard against Russian and French naval expansion in East Asia, London signed the 1902 Anglo-Japanese alliance to encourage Japan to resist Russian expansion in Manchuria and Korea and to secure Japanese cooperation in defense of British interests in China. And the United States had yet to mobilize its military potential. Thus Japan's only obstacle to Northeast Asian primacy was Russia. With Britain's

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assistance and America's blessing, Tokyo defeated Russia in the 1904–05 Russo-Japanese War and achieved preeminence in Korea and in Manchuria, where it acquired Russia's railways, bases, and treaty rights. During World War I and the Russian Revolution, Japan secured German rights and bases in China and consolidated its control over Manchuria. Its further expansion into China and Indochina in the 1930s and early 1940s reflected ongoing Chinese instability and France's preoccupation with war in Europe.  

Japanese expansion had achieved impressive results. Nonetheless, parallel-ling Russia's experience in the Far East, even when enjoying the most opportune circumstances for expansion, Japan was unable to overcome geography. Each new foray into divided China, rather than stabilizing Japan's resource base, led to an expanded front and increased dependency on imported resources, eliciting further expansion to meet the need for additional resources. As late as 1939, Tokyo imported more than 91 percent of the military's commodities and equipment, most of which came from the United States. Japan was critically dependent on the United States for scrap iron, aluminum, nickel, and petroleum products. Continued dependency led to incessant expansion, culminating in Japan's occupation of Southeast Asia and to World War II in the Pacific.

Japan's bid for self-reliance failed not only when the international circumstances were most favorable, but also when its domestic system was uniquely oriented toward strategic expansion. At the height of its expansion, the Japanese government exercised unparalleled control over strategic resources and finished products. Nonetheless, Japan could not simultaneously expand, achieve autarchy, and compete with the United States. Ultimately, its bid for great power stature contributed to its demise. Similar to Russia's experience, Japanese overexpansion taxed Tokyo's ability to compete with a better-qualified great power—the United States—and contributed to Japan's total defeat in World War II.

25. Iriye, Across the Pacific, pp. 207–208; and Barnhart, Japan Prepares for Total War, pp. 91–94, 156, 198–203.
Japan will not be able to make a similar bid for full-fledged great power status in the twenty-first century. In the 1930s China was not capable of being a great power, and the United States had not yet decided to become one. Neither of these conditions will likely reemerge in the next quarter century. Domestically, Japan’s economy is far more decentralized than it was in the 1930s. Moreover, its trade surplus with the United States makes its dependent on access to the U.S. market. Its dependency on imported energy resources, including petroleum from U.S. allies transported through U.S.-controlled shipping lanes, creates similar vulnerabilities.\(^{27}\)

In the era of air power, Japan faces an additional geopolitical obstacle to becoming a pole. Prior to the development of aircraft, the English Channel served as a formidable mote insulating Britain’s resources and industrial base from attack. But as German bombers and missiles revealed, the English Channel is no longer wide enough to buffer English strategic resources. Japan faces a similar lack of strategic depth. Its economy and infrastructure are vulnerable to attack from the sea—as they were during World War II from U.S. aircraft based both on carriers and on Saipan, Guam, Tinian, and ultimately Okinawa—and from land-based aircraft—such as Soviet aircraft deployed in the Far East in the 1980s (and perhaps Chinese aircraft in the future). Alfred Mahan’s observation in 1900 that Japan’s size and proximity to other East Asian powers diminish its great power potential is especially relevant for the twenty-first century.\(^{28}\)

**China and the United States: Future Great Power Rivals**

The debate over a “rising China” not only obscures the reality that China is already a great power in a bipolar structure, but also the understanding that China can destabilize only by challenging U.S. maritime supremacy. Similarly, American concern for the rise of China obscures the reality that the United States has the potential to strive for and achieve what others cannot—regional hegemony through the erosion of Chinese influence. Whether East Asia re-

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mains stable will depend on the evolving strategic capabilities and aspirations of these two powers to penetrate each other’s sphere of influence.

**CHINA: THE GEOGRAPHY OF HEGEMONIC POTENTIAL**

China, unlike Japan, has the natural resources to sustain economic development and strategic autonomy. It is now a major trading country, making extensive use of international markets and capital. China’s export industries dominate many of its domestic regional economies and provide much of the capital and technology needed to modernize its industrial base and infrastructure. Nonetheless, if Chinese modernization succeeds, it could then be sustained through relatively minimal reliance on imported resources. Although China’s use of foreign oil is increasing, it possesses the world’s largest supply of coal reserves. These reserves are located in inaccessible interior regions, but should China’s infrastructure improve with economic modernization, these reserves will be accessible, reliable, and inexpensive. Coal will remain China’s principal energy resource well into the twenty-first century. But with greater capital and advanced technology, China will be able to exploit untapped petroleum reserves in Xinjiang Province.29

China complements minimal resource dependency with minimal long-term dependency on foreign markets. Should modernization continue, China’s population will have improved purchasing power, which will enable it to sustain high-technology, capital-intensive industries. Moreover, China’s large population will enable it to maximize labor productivity with minimal overseas investment. Rather than move abroad as labor costs increase—as the U.S. and Japanese enterprises have had to do—Chinese enterprises, following market forces, will be able to move further into China’s interior to exploit an inexhaustible, inexpensive, and relatively reliable labor force.

In addition to possessing the natural and demographic resources needed for strategic autonomy, China also has size and internal lines of communication, providing the strategic depth necessary for a “home base, productive and secure,” the “essential” element of naval power.30 Whereas Japan’s insular geography makes its resources and industries open to attack from the sea,
China’s continental dimensions enable it to develop its industrial base far from its borders and coastline, relatively secure from land-based and sea-based air attacks. Chairman Mao Zedong understood the strategic significance of China’s “rear area.” During the height of the U.S.-China and Sino-Soviet conflicts from the mid-1960s until the early 1970s, he ordered China’s industrial facilities moved to the interior. This industrial “third front” was an integral element of Mao’s security strategy.\textsuperscript{31}

In this respect, China poses the same potential challenge to stability as Germany and the Soviet Union once did. If Germany had emerged victorious in World War I, “she would have established her sea power on a wider base than any in history, in fact on the widest possible base.”\textsuperscript{32} During the Cold War, in geopolitical terms, Soviet “control of Western Europe would [have] open[ed] the oceans to Soviet maritime power . . . facilitat[ing] Soviet hegemony in the Mediterranean and its littoral and the Middle East.”\textsuperscript{33} It is thus inevitable that the United States focus on China as the most likely challenger to regional stability. China is the only country that could conceivably challenge U.S. maritime power and East Asia’s bipolar structure.

THE UNITED STATES: ENDURING HEGEMONIC CAPABILITIES
The combination of America’s separation from East Asia by the Pacific Ocean and its secure borders neighbored by weaker powers enables the United States to develop military power in strategic isolation and to focus strategic resources on naval power for power projection into distant regions. No other East Asian power has either attribute. Added to these geopolitical factors is the size of the United States and its distribution of indigenous resources. Similar to China, the United States can exploit resources and develop industries in its interior, out of range of an adversary’s navy, even should it reach the U.S. coastline. It is an “insular power of continental size.” Equally important, similar to China but unlike Russia, the United States’ climate and terrain facilitate development of population centers and a dense infrastructure connecting coastal regions with the interior, providing secure interior resources to develop maritime and air power.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} Mackinder, \textit{Democratic Ideals and Reality}, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{33} Gray, \textit{The Geopolitics of Super Power}, p. 71.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., pp. 45, 47.
U.S. strategic assets not only enable maritime power, but also power projection against mainland adversaries. U.S. success in World War II reflected the use of maritime power for land power.\(^35\) Once the U-boat threat had been defeated, secure American ship production provided unlimited supplies for U.S. and Allied forces. But naval power alone did not win the war. U.S. aircraft produced in the security of the United States and based in England bombed German industrial assets, slowing German production and compelling Germany to deploy aircraft in defense of the homeland, thereby reducing air support for German troops on the eastern and western fronts. During the landing at Normandy, 12,000 Allied planes encountered 300 German aircraft, reflecting the relative geographic vulnerability of the German economy to enemy bombing.

But America’s secure rear area tells only half of the story of superior power. American economic resources tell the other half. In 1941 the United States produced more steel, aluminum, oil, and motor vehicles than the other industrial powers combined. In 1940, with the exception of naval vessels, U.S. military production was nominal. By 1941 the United States already produced far more aircraft, tanks, and heavy guns than the Axis countries combined. By the end of the war U.S. production of major naval vessels was sixteen times greater than that of Japan. Although a two-front war may have ultimately undermined German power, the United States faced no limitations. Indeed, while Russia, Great Britain and, for much of the war, Germany strained to wage one-front wars, the United States successfully waged a two-front war.

In the aftermath of the Cold War the United States is in a unique historical position to develop great power capabilities on land and on the sea. It should be able to maintain these advantages for at least the next quarter century. Although certain purchasing power parity methodologies forecast considerable relative growth of the Chinese economy, even these methodologies predict continued U.S. economic superiority.\(^36\) Moreover, U.S. self-reliance rests on a secure base. America’s large population and high level of development mean

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that even should the United States lose access to foreign markets, domestic demand would sustain its industries. In 1997 U.S. exports contributed only 12 percent to the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP). In 1995 only four countries in the world had smaller ratios of trade to GDP.\textsuperscript{37} Dependency on imported energy resources is more complex. On the one hand, in 1995 the United States relied on oil imports for approximately 25 percent of energy consumption. But automobiles are the primary consumer of oil products. Critical industries rely on domestic resources, including coal and hydropower. Overall U.S. energy dependency is minimal compared with that of other powers, with the exception of China. Japan, for example, in 1997 relied on imported oil for nearly 60 percent of its energy needs.\textsuperscript{38} Finally, U.S. domestic coal and petroleum reserves are significant.

In East Asia the United States is not a declining power in either absolute or relative terms. It is a great power in a bipolar structure and will remain so for the next quarter century. Its strategic depth and isolation as well as its naval power allow it to dominate the coastal waters and to penetrate the air space of any country in the world, including China, with minimal risk to either its navy or air force. These capabilities enable the United States to neutralize the naval capabilities of a great power competitor and to isolate it from offshore allies and resources, while guaranteeing its own access to international resources. Moreover, strategic nuclear superiority allows the United States to carry out such activities with minimal risk of retaliation against the homeland. The United States will possess these resources and capabilities for the next quarter century. It is natural that China focus its suspicions on the United States, just as the United States concentrates its suspicions on China. The United States is the only power that can challenge Chinese territorial integrity.

Peace and Stability in Bipolar East Asia

The United States and China are the two great powers of East Asia. They will not be strategic partners. Rather, they will be strategic competitors engaged in a traditional great power struggle for security and influence. The similarities between the dynamics of the Cold War U.S.-Soviet relationship and the emerg-


ing U.S.-China relationship are striking. Both are bipolar great power relationships. In both situations, the conflict entails a major land power and a major maritime power in which each has the existing or the potential capabilities to challenge the vital interests of the other. In addition, the great power focus in each case is a strategic and economic region with global significance. These similarities suggest that U.S.-China conflict may resemble U.S.-Soviet conflict.

But various bipolar structures do not necessarily exhibit the same great power dynamics. Depending on additional factors, some bipolar rivalries can be more stable than others. Twenty-first-century U.S.-China bipolarity should be relatively stable and peaceful, in part because geography reinforces bipolar tendencies toward stable balancing and great power management of regional order. In addition, the geography of East Asia, by affecting great power interests and by moderating the impact of the security dilemma, offsets the tendency of bipolarity toward crises, arms races, and local wars.\(^{39}\)

**BIPOLARITY, BALANCING, AND GEOGRAPHY**

In response to superior U.S. capabilities, China is exhibiting the domestic balancing associated with bipolarity. It has discarded Marxist ideological impediments and overcome significant political obstacles to pursue pragmatic market-based economic policies.\(^{40}\) Within its limited means, China has improved its ground forces and focused on the technological modernization of its navy and air force. Beijing has also managed great power relations to maximize allocation of resources to domestic growth. It has reached border agreements and developed confidence-building measures with Russia and the bordering Central Asian states. It has developed cooperative economic and security ties with South Korea and encouraged North Korea to moderate its foreign policies. It has also maximized Sino-Japanese economic cooperation. And Chinese leaders have compromised on many issues in U.S.-China relations to diminish the potential for costly conflict with the United States.

These policies assure Beijing access to international economic resources and minimize the likelihood of international conflict that could reorient Beijing’s

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domestic policies from long-term balancing to short-term defense spending for management of immediate threats. Although Chinese motives for pursuing pragmatic economic development and foreign policies are less important than the systemic affects of its policies, it is significant that Chinese leaders explain that economic modernization is China's key to defense modernization and preparation for the possibility of heightened great power tension in the twenty-first century.41

The United States faces no immediate threat in East Asia. But as a maritime power it must look with suspicion on any continental power that achieves preeminence on land. In part in preparation for possible Chinese expansion, Washington maintains a high level of military deployments and alliance development. Ten years after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, U.S. defense spending is greater than the combined spending of the next six largest defense budgets. U.S. defense priorities reflect concern for China and the corresponding need for maritime power; budget cuts have not reduced American naval deployments in East Asia. Acquisition and research and development also continue, reflected in the 1998 launching of a new aircraft carrier (the Harry S. Truman), development of a twenty-first-century warplane and advanced nuclear missiles, and research on missile defense and other advanced technologies. In addition, recent U.S.-Japan agreements put the alliance on more stable political footing and enhance U.S. wartime access to Japanese civilian and military facilities.42

East Asian bipolarity also contributes to regional order. In contrast to great powers in multipolarity, great powers in bipolar structures not only have a greater stake in international order, but their disproportionate share of world capabilities gives them the ability to accept the free-riding of smaller states and to assume the burden of order in their respective spheres of influence, so that small states do not challenge the interests of the great powers. This is easier when the allies' contribution to security and their ability to resist are negligible.43

In East Asia these dynamics of bipolarity exist. China towers over its smaller neighbors, and the United States towers over its security partners, with the

43. On the advantages of bipolarity versus multipolarity in developing a security order, see Waltz, Theory of International Politics, pp. 195–199, 204–209.
partial exception of Japan. Geopolitics reinforces these dynamics. Because Chinese and U.S. spheres of influence are geographically distinct and separated by water, intervention by one power in its own sphere will not appear as threatening to the interests of the other power in its sphere. Freed from the worry of great power retaliation, each power has a relatively freer hand to impose order on its allies. Thus China has intervened in Indochina to achieve both regional order and its security interests without eliciting U.S. countermeasures. In contrast, Soviet military intervention in Eastern Europe led to heightened concern in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) over Soviet ambitions and contributed to heightened great power tension.

**BIPOLARITY, GEOGRAPHY, AND NATIONAL SECURITY INTERESTS**

Positive outcomes of bipolarity appear to be taking place. But neorealism suggests that bipolarity will also have negative repercussions: high threat-perception and unnecessarily high tension and costly foreign policies. In contrast to multipolarity, clarity of threat leads to an intense concern for reputation and repeated “tests of will,” resulting in immediate responses to any relative gain by another pole, no matter how peripheral to the balance of power. The Cold War conflict seems to validate this argument, with its superpower arm races, numerous crises, and repeated great power interventions in the developing world.\(^{44}\) East Asian bipolarity thus suggests that U.S.-China relations in the twenty-first century will be similarly plagued by high tension.

Polarity is a powerful determinant of great power dynamics. But it is not the only determinant nor necessarily even the primary one. Other realist variables complement or even counteract the impact of bipolarity. Geographically conditioned great power interests and corresponding weapons procurement patterns can be equally powerful variables affecting great power relationships in bipolarity and multipolarity. The U.S.-China relationship is one between a land power and a maritime power, each with its own distinct geopolitical imperatives. To the extent that their vital regional interests and military capabilities do not compete, conflict can be restrained.\(^{45}\)


\(^{45}\) See Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances*, chap. 1, on realist and neorealist variables in great power dynamics. For the effect of geography on balance-of-power incentives for offensive or defensive military doctrines, see Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), especially pp. 65–71, 78,
U.S. MARITIME INTERESTS AND REGIONAL STABILITY. American interests in East Asia are twofold. First, the United States has an interest in ensuring sufficient strategic presence in regional affairs so that it can militarily resist an effort by any power to dominate the region. To accomplish this objective, it needs cooperation from influential regional states that will offer U.S. forces the facilities necessary to maintain a forward presence. For an extraregional maritime power such as the United States, cooperation with an offshore second-rank maritime power is appropriate, for capabilities are complementary and the regional ally can provide the distant power with forward yet relatively secure naval facilities.

In Europe the United States has traditionally relied on Great Britain as its maritime partner; in post–World War II East Asia it has depended on Japan. But Washington has never been satisfied with relying on Britain to ensure a divided Europe. In the early years of the Republic it required that the great powers on the European mainland be divided so that the United States could cooperate with a continental power. In later years it understood that great power dominance of the European peninsula would exclude U.S. naval presence from the western and southern European maritime perimeter, requiring excessive concentration of U.S. forces in Great Britain. The hegemon’s southern ports would be relatively secure from U.S. naval pressure, and it might achieve superiority over U.S. forces regarding naval access to the southern Atlantic and the Mediterranean and, thus, northern Africa and the Middle East.46

In contrast, the geography of East Asia allows for maritime balancing. Not only is Japan relatively more powerful than Great Britain in its respective theater, but more important, the dominance of mainland East Asia cannot yield an aspiring hegemon unimpeded access to the ocean. From Japan in Northeast Asia to Malaysia in Southeast Asia, the East Asian mainland is rimmed with


46. This is one of the central themes in Samuel Flagg Bemis, A Diplomatic History of the United States (New York: Henry Holt, 1936). See also Spykman, Geography of the Peace, pp. 55–57. For American strategy following World War II, see Melvyn P. Leffler, A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992).
a continuous chain of island countries that possess strategic location and naval facilities. Access to these countries enables a maritime power to carry out effective naval operations along the perimeter of a mainland power. The American response to Japanese expansion prior to World War II reflected the United States’ strategic interest in maritime East Asia. Washington did not resist Japanese expansion into Korea. Even after Russian and British military decline in East Asia, the United States did not consider Japanese control over China or even Indochina, and its resultant acquisition of the attributes of a continental power, worthy of a military response. Washington’s embargoes against Japan and its preparation for war were taken in anticipation that Tokyo would not stop with Indochina but would seek British and Dutch possessions in maritime Southeast Asia.47

The United States requires sufficient naval presence in East Asia for maritime containment of a continental power. In effect, this has been the strategy of the United States since its withdrawal from mainland Southeast Asia in 1975, first against the Soviet Union and now against China. Relying on its economic influence and unchallenged maritime power in East Asia, the United States has consolidated strategic alignments with all of the littoral states. As noted above, it has reached arrangements for naval access to facilities in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei. With these agreements and its bases and access to facilities in Japan, the United States carries out naval encirclement of China. It can apply air and naval pressure on Chinese access to the ocean along the entire perimeter of mainland East Asia.

Despite advances in military technologies, America’s ability to depend on a strategy of military balancing will survive for the next twenty-five years. China will undoubtedly try to develop space-based reconnaissance technologies that would enable it to track and target U.S. vessels in the South China Sea. But the United States is not standing still. Its ongoing technology development will allow it to maintain superiority in electronic warfare, enabling it, for example, to hide its fleet from Chinese satellite reconnaissance. Some studies argue that China is falling behind the United States in technology

development. Should there be a “revolution in military affairs” (RMA), it will be a largely American revolution.  

The requirements of maritime balancing allow the United States to dominate regional shipping lanes and project power wherever necessary in maritime East Asia, and thus achieve its second vital interest: secure access for itself and its allies to regional markets and to strategic resources, including oil in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, in time of war. Even should China develop naval capabilities in its coastal waters, at minimal financial and tactical inconvenience U.S. and allied commercial and military fleets could use secure shipping lanes that are far from mainland aircraft and are dominated by U.S. air and naval forces based in maritime nations.

The United States is an East Asian maritime power with no strategic imperative to compete for influence on the mainland. And the status quo enables it to secure its balance of power interests and its interest in regional shipping lanes through a maritime containment strategy. This contributes to great power stability. Moreover, despite American superiority, U.S. expansionism onto mainland East Asia would face considerable obstacles. Geopoliticians and other international relations theorists have long debated the ease with which maritime power can be used to develop land power.  

49. But local geography


determines the efficacy of capabilities. The American military experiences in Vietnam and Korea revealed how difficult it is to use maritime power to project air and land power onto East Asian terrain, in contrast to maritime-based power projection into the Middle East. The American military continues to have a “no more land wars in Asia” mentality. The difficulty of power projection onto mainland East Asia is a powerful deterrent to any U.S. interest in challenging the status quo.

**Chinese Continental Interests and Regional Stability.** Just as the United States has secured its vital East Asian maritime interests, China has secured its vital continental interests. China has achieved unique success for a continental power: secure borders on its entire land periphery. But twenty-first-century regional peace will depend on whether China, having secured its continental interests, will turn its attention to developing maritime power-projection capabilities, challenging U.S. interests and bipolarity.

China’s status as a continental power not only reflects geography but also the culture of a land power. For more than 2,000 years, Chinese territorial expansion has been led by peasants seeking arable land, followed by a Confucian culture and the administrative and military power of the Chinese state. During this same period, China never carried out territorial expansion across water. Up to the twentieth century, Chinese development of a navy has been, at best, sporadic and brief. Its maritime tradition has focused on commercial exploration. Moreover, threats to Chinese security have originated from the interior. Until the Chinese and Russian Empires met in Central Asia in the nineteenth century and China created the province of Xinjiang, China could never subdue the nomadic armies on the Central Asian steppe. The absence of natural borders made Chinese territory vulnerable to military incursions and enabled nomadic armies to retreat deep into the interior to evade China’s retaliating armies. At its worst, nomadic armies established “foreign” dynasties. So persistent was the nomadic threat that during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) a strategic culture developed regarding relations with the Mong-

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gols, in which Beijing eschewed all thought of diplomacy and limited victories, seeking total annihilation of its nomadic adversaries.51

China’s only experience of threat from maritime powers occurred in the nineteenth century. But this exception underscores that land powers pose the primary threat to Chinese security. Although the British navy exacted humiliating defeats on China, Great Britain never attempted to occupy Chinese territory (with the exception of treaty ports). Rather, the greatest threats to China came first from Russia and then from Japan, which used land power to try to conquer China. Japan, following the strategy of the seventeenth-century Manchus, used northeast China as a base to invade the interior. There is no period in Chinese history when a maritime power—as opposed to a land power—posed the greatest threat to Chinese rule or threatened to establish a foreign dynasty.

Two thousand years of continental expansion and of threats from land powers have created a Chinese bias toward the development of land power, just as secure land borders and extensive oceanic frontiers have fostered an American “insular perspective” on international politics. But culture is not immutable. Now that China has secure land borders and is modernizing its economy, its national interests might change—however delayed or mitigated by history and culture. Yet despite China’s successes, a continental strategy continues to serve its singular vital interest: borders secure from great power influence.

China remains vigilant to land threats. It is bordered by thirteen countries, second only to Russia. Its most important security concern is its long border with Russia. As Chinese commentators observe, Russia retains the geographic resources required to redevelop formidable military capabilities. This is the case especially in Central Asia, where the theater is close to the Russian heartland but far from China’s industrial and population centers and separated by inhospitable desert climate and terrain. China’s Central Asian frontier is its strategic vulnerability, just as Russia’s Far East is its strategic vulnerability. During the 1930s and 1940s Moscow exploited the weakness of China’s

Nationalist government by developing dominant political influence in Xinjiang Province. In the early 1960s Moscow used ethnic unrest in Xinjiang to threaten China. The prospect of Sino-Soviet competition for the allegiance of the Central Asian states, in a reenactment of the nineteenth-century “great game” between Russia and Britain, cannot be dismissed. Moreover, many Russians believe that China poses a long-term threat to Russian security. Whereas U.S. territory is protected from China by the Pacific Ocean, Russian territory is vulnerable to Chinese land forces. The fact that Russia and China are neighbors means that China cannot control the Eurasian “heartland” and be confident of secure borders: thus it cannot place strategic priority on maritime power.

China’s border concerns are not limited to Russian power. The Central Asian countries adjacent to China have weak governments and could be used by a larger power, such as Russia, to threaten Chinese territorial integrity. China must also consider the long-term prospect for domestic instability in its western provinces, where religious and ethnic minorities identify with the majority populations of China’s potentially hostile and unstable neighbors. Southwest China is bordered by India, which has great power aspirations, and southern China is bordered by Vietnam, which still yearns for a great power ally to enable it to come out from under China’s strategic shadow. In Northeast Asia Korea could be used by a great power to threaten China’s industrial heartland, as Japan and then the United States did for much of the twentieth century.

Given the potential for multifront conflicts and strategic encirclement, China faces greater potential security challenges than those ever faced by dynastic

China. It would have to assume a long-term stable strategic status quo on its land borders to divert substantial resources to naval power. Yet even if China did so, its navy could not approach parity with the U.S. navy. Alfred Mahan went so far as to argue that “history has conclusively demonstrated the inability of a state with even a single continental frontier to compete in naval development with one that is insular, although of smaller population and resources.”55 The challenge to a land power seeking maritime power is even greater in the twenty-first century, when the financial and technology requirements include construction of an aircraft carrier and its specialized aircraft as well as the support vessels and advanced technologies necessary to protect the carrier.

While trying to maintain funding for its land forces, by 2025 China could at best develop a “luxury fleet” similar to that developed by the Soviet Union in the latter stage of the Cold War. Such a second-order fleet might achieve coastal-water defense, pushing the U.S. navy away from the Chinese mainland and interfering with unrestricted U.S. penetration of Chinese air space. It might also be able to disrupt U.S. naval activities further from shore. But, given the United States’ ability to respond, Chinese capabilities could not provide the foundation for a great power navy that could challenge U.S. supremacy.56 Indeed, even if the Chinese navy were able to complicate U.S. naval activities, it would not strike first for fear of a retaliatory strike that would destroy its navy, so that the United States would maintain unrestricted use of maritime East Asia.

China will face the same obstacles to developing naval capabilities vis-à-vis a maritime power that Russia, the Soviet Union, and Germany faced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. British maritime supremacy undermined Russia’s effort to use naval power to exercise influence in the Ottoman Empire in the mid-nineteenth century, and London took the initiative to destroy the Russian fleet at Sebastopol during the Crimean War. Similarly, the best that Moscow could aim for in the 1950s and 1960s was a “land-oriented” fleet to reduce U.S. ability to strike Soviet territory with carrier-based aircraft. By the

1970s it could do no more than “inhibit” U.S. maritime movements. Even in the 1980s, the primary role of the Soviet surface fleet was protection of the homeland and control of coastal waters. Despite the expansion of the Pacific Fleet, Moscow could not develop an adequate response to U.S. “horizontal escalation” against its naval facilities in the Soviet Far East. Overall, the United States could still use its “central maritime position . . . to seize the strategic initiative.”

Germany was similarly frustrated in its effort to develop naval power. Alfred von Tirpitz’s “risk fleet” failed because Germany could never develop sufficient capability to threaten British maritime supremacy, so that during World War I England retained control of the seas without having to engage and destroy the German fleet. For its part, Germany did not dare to initiate hostilities; it understood that Britain would destroy its fleet. Moreover, having diverted funds to the navy, Germany lacked the ability to defeat the French army.

In the absence of compelling maritime interests, Beijing’s continental interests and U.S. maritime capabilities should deter China from making naval power a priority. Even continued economic growth and greater energy demand will not lead it to develop maritime capabilities to defend its overseas interests and shipping lanes. Because a Chinese maritime buildup would lead to countervailing U.S. policy, China’s energy imports would remain vulnerable to U.S. forbearance. This prospect leads to two policy outcomes. First, given its huge coal reserves, China will continue to prefer coal over petroleum. Second, China will exploit foreign petroleum reserves in regions where its land power has the advantage. China’s continental interests are reflected in its effort to secure access to Central Asian oil. Beijing’s 1997 investment in Kazakhstan’s major petroleum company and its plans to build a pipeline from Kazakhstan to


Xinjiang reflect its commitment to developing secure energy resources. Its interest in a natural gas pipeline connecting Siberia to China's northeast provinces also reflects this strategy.\textsuperscript{59} The current low international price of oil makes these and other such projects economically very unattractive, but their value is in their contribution to long-term Chinese strategic hedging against dependency on oil controlled by an adversarial power.

Finally, is China a dissatisfied power seeking a "place at the table," so that the politics of prestige could lead to irrational and dangerous Chinese over-expansion?\textsuperscript{60} To some extent, the answer will depend on whether Washington will share leadership with Beijing on issues affecting Chinese interests. Recent U.S. policy is encouraging. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that regionally China has already secured a place at the table. China's struggle from 1949 to 1989 reflected this objective, and the outcome was a success. In the aftermath of the Cold War, East Asian countries acknowledge that China has legitimate great power interests and that its cooperation is required to secure regional peace. China and the United States jointly manage the Korean Peninsula. China has a leadership role in various regional organizations, including the security-orientated ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) Regional Forum and the forum on Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). In both organizations Beijing, reflecting its regional authority, has cooperated with local powers to frustrate U.S. policy objectives.\textsuperscript{61} Beijing is also gratified by the attention it received during the Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s. China is not a superpower, and its leadership in global issues and institutions is more limited, but its leadership in the East Asian balance of power may satisfy its demands for regional leadership.


\textsuperscript{60} This is the argument in Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, \textit{The Coming Conflict with China} (New York: Knopf, 1997).

BIPOLARITY, GEOGRAPHY, AND THE SECURITY DILEMMA IN EAST ASIA

The contrasting interests of maritime and continental powers, the strategic characteristics of the regional status quo, and the geography of East Asia all contribute to the prospect of relatively low-level great power tension in the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, even if both China’s and the United States’ vital interests are satisfied in the current order, the security dilemma in bipolarity could create repeated crises and costly arms races. But in the current strategic environment, preferred weapons programs affect the security dilemma in bipolarity by favoring the defense.

Geographically determined interests lead states to prefer different weapons systems. This can have a profound impact on the security dilemma, for weapons specialization can lead to a defensive bias, mitigating the security dilemma and the effect of bipolarity on the prevalence of crises and arms races as well as reducing the role of nuclear weapons in security. In a confrontation between a land power and a maritime power, each side’s specialization is disadvantaged in the other’s theater.62 Thus China will remain inferior to the United States in maritime theaters, and the United States will remain inferior to China regarding ground-force activities on mainland East Asia. This pattern means that the advantage will be for the defense. On the mainland, China’s massive conventional retaliatory capabilities allow it to risk a U.S. ground-force attack. U.S. ability to retaliate and destroy Chinese naval assets allows it to risk that China will fire the first shot. Neither side has to fear that the other’s provocative diplomacy or movement of troops is a prelude to attack and immediately escalate to heightened military readiness. Tension can be slower to develop, allowing the protagonists time to manage crises and avoid unnecessary escalation.

These dynamics also affect the prospect for arms races. Because each power has a defensive advantage in its own theater, each can resist an equivalent escalatory response to the other’s military acquisitions. Each augmentation of China’s land-power capabilities does not create a corresponding diminution of U.S. security in maritime East Asia. Similarly, enhanced U.S. maritime presence in the South China Sea, for example, does not create an equivalent decrease in

Chinese security on the mainland. The result is that bipolar pressures for a spiraling arms race are minimized. Finally, because each side feels secure with the conventional balance within its respective theater, neither is compelled to adopt a massive retaliation strategy to deter an attack on its own forces or to make credible an extended deterrence commitment. Thus there are reduced fears of a first-strike nuclear attack during a crisis and reduced likelihood of a nuclear arms race reflecting the security dilemma dynamics involving the difficulty in interpreting a counterpart’s effort to secure retaliatory capabilities.

The bipolar U.S.-Soviet struggle, which was equally a struggle between a land power and a sea power, did not exhibit similar stability because the geographies of Europe and East Asia are different. In East Asia geography mitigates the pressures of bipolarity; in Europe geography reinforces bipolar pressures to aggravate the security dilemma.63 Because of geography, the United States could not rely on maritime containment of the Soviet Union to achieve its vital European interests. It required a U.S. presence on mainland Europe to deny Moscow the combination of a secure continental base and access to strategic seas. Thus the Cold War confrontation on the European continent was waged by the army of a continental power and the army of a maritime power. In this setting, because of a widely perceived Soviet conventional force advantage, NATO believed that Moscow would benefit from an offensive attack.64 Whereas in East Asia geography offsets twenty-first-century bipolar pressures to mitigate the security dilemma, European geography reinforced the effect of bipolarity to aggravate the security dilemma. The result was the rapid spiraling escalation of the Cold War in the 1940s and the Berlin crises.

The Soviet offensive advantage also contributed to the nuclear arms race. Befitting a maritime power, Washington believed that it could not mobilize the resources to maintain sufficient conventional military forces on the European mainland to deny Moscow the benefits of an offensive strategy and thus deter a Soviet attack on Western Europe. Its response was the Eisenhower administration’s “new look,” whereby the United States would use the threat of massive retaliation against a conventional attack to offset Soviet conventional

63. On bipolarity and Cold War tension, see Waltz, Theory of International Politics, p. 171.
force superiority and to deter an invasion of Western Europe. The United States thus significantly increased its nuclear forces, contributing to the nuclear security dilemma, whereby each superpower feared that its adversary's second-strike capability could be used to destroy its own retaliatory capabilities. The combined result of bipolarity and geography was the nuclear arms race. In contrast, in East Asia geography and the resulting capabilities and defensive advantage held by each pole in its respective sphere of influence diminishes each power's reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence and, thus, offsets bipolar pressures for an arms race.

**Potential Flashpoints: The Spratly Islands, Korea, and Taiwan**

The three most prominent East Asian conflicts are the territorial dispute over the Spratly Islands, the prospect for great power conflict on the Korean Peninsula, and the U.S.-China dispute over Taiwan. Of these three, the Spratly Islands conflict is the least significant. Because the disputed islands are in the U.S.-dominated South China Sea, are too small to possess strategic value for power projection, and seem to lack significant energy resources, Beijing has neither the ability nor the strategic interest to challenge the status quo by militarily dislodging the other claimants' forces from the islands. There may be occasional military probes by China or the other claimants, but the United States, because of its advantage in naval warfare, does not need to engage in rapid escalation to deter a possible Chinese offensive.

The Korean and Taiwan conflicts could become sources of heightened tension. They are the exceptions that prove the rule that geography affects the prospects for East Asian conflict. The Korean conflict is a source of heightened tension because it is the sole place in East Asia where the United States has retained a continental military presence. The United States, as a maritime power, like in Europe during the Cold War, has ground forces in South Korea.

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that are vulnerable to a surprise attack. Washington has therefore relied on nuclear weapons to deter an attack, contributing to North Korea’s incentive to acquire nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, the status quo has proved resilient for more than forty-five years. Nuclear deterrence has worked with minimal great power tension because China has North Korea as a buffer state and, thus, it has not had a strategic interest in encouraging North Korea to challenge the status quo. On the contrary, with its vital interests satisfied, Beijing has worked with Seoul and Washington to maintain the status quo.

The Korean Peninsula is not a major factor in the balance of power or in U.S. protection of shipping lanes. During the Cold War the U.S. presence on the peninsula denied the Soviet Union a “dagger pointed at the heart of Japan.” But this reflected Soviet lack of secure access from the Far East to the Sea of Japan. Because China has a long coast on the East China Sea, the increased threat to Japan from U.S. military withdrawal from the peninsula and greater cooperation between Beijing and Seoul would be marginal. Indeed, just as a twenty-first-century Chinese blue-water navy would be a “luxury fleet,” U.S. presence on the Korean Peninsula is a “luxury land force.” It gives the U.S. army forward presence on the East Asian mainland, facilitating power projection to China’s northeast border. South Korea is a valuable U.S. asset, but it is not a vital interest. It may become politically difficult for the United States to maintain bases in Japan should the Japanese begin to resent that they would be the only Asians with foreign bases on their soil. This is a political problem, however, not a strategic issue requiring belligerent policies.

American military officials are not pleased, but they are reconciled to the likelihood that after unification Seoul will likely request that U.S. ground forces leave Korea. Following unification Seoul may also develop closer relations with China. But Korean unification and closer relations between Beijing and Seoul will not make the United States significantly less secure or the balance of power less stable. It will, however, make East Asia less prone to heightened tension by eliminating a belligerent regime, ending the disruptive conflict between North Korea and South Korea, and reinforcing the dynamics of conflict between a land power and a maritime power.67

The Taiwan issue reflects a similar exception to the conflict between U.S. maritime power and Chinese land power. Taiwan lies in both theaters. Because

67. See Lippmann’s 1944 observation that China will inevitably dominate its “dependencies in the north” and his realist advice that the United States “should recognize that China will be the center of a third strategic system destined to include the whole of mainland Asia.” Lippmann, U.S. War Aims, pp. 103, 158.
Taiwan is an island, Washington can use superior maritime capabilities, including ships and aircraft, to defend it against China’s land-based forces. But Taiwan’s proximity to the mainland gives Beijing military superiority to deter Taiwan from attacking the mainland or declaring sovereign independence. Thus, unlike the Korean Peninsula, where North Korean land-power superiority requires U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy to create a stalemate, the Taiwan Strait stalemate is formed by mutual conventional deterrence: the mainland deters Taiwan with its land power, and the United States deters China with its maritime power. Because both theaters are defense dominant, the risk of war is minimal.

Furthermore, similar to the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan issue does not entail the vital interests of both powers. It is a vital interest to China, mirroring Cuba’s role in U.S. security strategy. But despite American support for Taiwan and U.S.-Taiwan ideological affinity, neither U.S.-Taiwan cooperation nor denial of Taiwan to mainland military presence is a U.S. balance-of-power or shipping interest. At no cost to its security, the United States ended military cooperation with Taiwan in the early 1970s. Should Beijing dominate Taiwan, the United States would lose the long-term option of renewed strategic cooperation with an “unsinkable aircraft carrier” near the Chinese coast, depriving it of a beneficial but not vital offensive option regarding China. The United States could still use its bases in Japan and Guam and its access to naval facilities in Southeast Asia to dominate Chinese coastal waters and maintain maritime containment. At worst, should the mainland occupy Taiwan, the difference would be 150 additional miles of Chinese maritime power projection from the southern Chinese coast. During wartime this would require that the United States and its allies move their shipping lanes 150 miles eastward.

The 1995 visit to the United States by Taiwan’s Lee Teng-hui and the March 1996 confrontation in the Taiwan Strait were anomalies in an otherwise stable U.S.-China modus vivendi.68 From the early 1970s to the mid-1990s, the United States and China developed policies on Taiwan that allowed each power to maintain its most important interests while maximizing its cooperation on

other issues. During this period China denied Taiwan as a strategic asset to the United States. It also isolated Taiwan diplomatically and deterred it from declaring independence, so that Beijing maintained international recognition of its sovereignty over the island. Faced with the U.S. security commitment to Taiwan, Beijing sacrificed actual control over Chinese-claimed territory. For its part, the United States maintained its commitment to Taiwan, deterring a mainland attack and contributing to Taiwan’s democracy and economic development. Washington sacrificed its interest in giving Taiwan well-deserved “face” or “dignity”—that is, formal sovereignty—and compelled Taiwan to accept its nonsovereign status in international politics. By 1997 Beijing and Washington had reestablished cooperation based on this long-standing formula, and Taiwan’s leaders, despite the pressures from democratic elections, have adopted a more cautious stance toward independence. Allowing for isolated, brief policy deviations from interest-based policies with short-term consequences, as occurred in 1995–96, Washington and Beijing should be able to manage the Taiwan issue for the next quarter century.

The Implications of U.S. Withdrawal

U.S.-China conflicts over the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan are no more than typical great power conflicts. They are not the stuff of cold wars or hot wars. China and the United States will compete for influence in third countries throughout East Asia and elsewhere. This competition will likely entail conflict over “destabilizing” weapons sales, including U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and Chinese arms sales to the Middle East. Such conflict is to be expected in any great power relationship. Beijing and Washington can manage these conflicts without sustained high-level tension. And without Cold War tensions, they can carry out extensive economic relations and normal diplomatic exchanges.

What would happen, however, if the United States downgraded its role as an East Asian great power with balance-of-power responsibilities? Neorealism predicts that another great power would emerge to balance Chinese power. Indeed, Japan has hedged its bets. While relying on alignment with the United States, it has developed advanced-technology defense capabilities, including

air and naval power, and the foundation for independent power-projection capabilities. But it is not at all clear that Japan can balance China. For almost its entire history, Japan has accommodated Chinese power. Should China successfully modernize in the twenty-first century, Japan, because of its smaller population and industrial base, will be much more dependent than China on imported resources and foreign markets. Some Japanese dependency may well be on China’s economy and resources. Equally important, because of its proximity to China and its lack of strategic depth, Japan’s economy, including its industrial plant, will be more vulnerable than the Chinese economy to an exchange of air and missile attacks. The difference between Taiwan’s and Japan’s geographic vulnerability to Chinese missiles is one of degree, not of kind. This asymmetry also undermines Japan’s ability to engage in nuclear competition with China.

These disparities might encourage Japanese bandwagoning or ambitious Chinese policy. America’s response would be frantic and costly, and contribute to heightened tension, because it would be compelled to belatedly balance expanded Chinese power. In contrast, America’s contemporary strategic advantages enable it to balance Chinese power in a relatively stable and peaceful regional order, without a costly and dangerous military buildup.

Alternatively, the United States could reduce its regional presence by sharing balancing responsibilities with Japan. In these circumstances, Tokyo would be expected to develop power-projection capabilities, including aircraft carriers. For two reasons this arrangement would not be as beneficial as the current bipolar balance. First, partial U.S. withdrawal would create a de facto multipolar system, insofar as Japan, albeit a second-rank power, would assume greater weight in the regional balance of power and in the U.S.-Japan alliance. The instability of multipolar balancing suggests that the outcome could be just as costly for the United States as a pure bipolar structure involving Japan and China. Problems of alliance management and balancing, including buck-passing and the ambiguity of threats in multipolarity, could lead to costly last-minute balancing. Moreover, the larger role of second-rank powers would


71. See Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances*, especially chap. 2, on lesser great powers in balancing.
exacerbate free-rider behavior by smaller powers and weaken the ability and the incentives of the great powers to promote regional order.

Second, Japan’s buildup could lead to U.S.-Japan conflict. Unlike in U.S.-China relations, U.S. and Japanese capabilities could become competitive—between two maritime powers an offensive strike can be decisive, as Japan almost showed with Pearl Harbor.72 As long as the United States remains fully engaged, Japan’s navy complements U.S. power. But should Washington share naval power with Tokyo, it will likely create security dilemma pressures. Lacking full confidence that Japan would use expanded naval capabilities in support of U.S. interests, Washington may be compelled to balance Japan’s naval power through naval expansion. There would also be increased U.S.-Japan competition for influence in the local maritime states and reduced economic cooperation. The result could well be a more expensive U.S. defense policy and a less stable and peaceful regional order.

Finally, both full and partial U.S. withdrawal suffer from a common problem. Each would sacrifice U.S. primacy for the chimera of cheaper balancing. Because the benefits of primacy are many and valuable, the cost of maintaining primacy manageable and the risks of abandoning primacy great, the current balance of power is far preferable to a Sino-Japanese balance of power or a U.S.-China-Japan balance of power.73 The price of retrenchment would be U.S. security dependence on cooperation with Japan. American access to regional shipping lanes would depend significantly on the Japanese navy. U.S. cooperation with local maritime countries would similarly depend on Japanese forbearance. Japanese politics could have as great an impact on U.S. security as American politics. And this is the positive scenario. Should Japan prove uncooperative or should security dilemma dynamics erode cooperation, the United States would also depend on Chinese cooperation and Chinese politics to secure its interests in East Asia.

A strong American presence maximizes the stability of the balance of power while offsetting the negative consequences of bipolarity through mitigation of the security dilemma. It is less costly than withdrawal. Current defense spending is well below Cold War levels, but it is sufficient to maintain maritime supremacy and a regional balance of power for the next thirty years. Well into the twenty-first century, the U.S.-China bipolar competition will be the most

effective and inexpensive strategy for the United States to realize its vital regional interests.

Conclusion

Other factors besides geography and structure affect stability. Democracy, interdependence, and formal multilateral security institutions can contribute to stability, but they are not necessary causes of stability. Nineteenth-century Europe experienced a relatively stable and peaceful order in the absence of widespread democracy, interdependence, and formal institutions. That all three factors are absent from contemporary East Asia does not necessarily mean there will be a greater prevalence of war, crises, and heightened conflict. This article has argued that geography contributes to regional stability and order because it shapes the a priori causes of conflict: capabilities, interests, and the security dilemma.

The prospects for regional peace and stability are good because geography minimizes the likelihood of a power transition and because stable bipolarity encourages timely balancing and great power ability and interest to create order. Geography will further contribute to regional order by offsetting the tendency of bipolarity to exacerbate great power tension. The U.S.-China bipolar conflict is a rivalry between a land power and a maritime power. This dynamic reduces conflict over vital interests and mitigates the impact of the security dilemma, reducing the likelihood of protracted high-level tension, repeated crises, and arms races.

The combination of geography and polarity will contribute to regional peace and order, but neither alone nor in combination are they sufficient causes of peace and order. National policies can be destabilizing. There is no guarantee that the United States will maintain a consistent contribution to the regional balance of power, that China will pursue limited ambitions, or that Washington and Beijing can peacefully manage the Taiwan issue. Despite the positive effects of geography and bipolarity, certain twenty-first-century weapons systems, such as theater missile defense, can exacerbate the security dilemma and contribute to arms races and heightened bilateral and regional tension.74 The best that can be said is that structure and geography offer policymakers greater

confidence in the prospects for a relatively stable and peaceful order and, thus, the opportunity to try to maximize great power cooperation.

Pessimism suggests that America prepare for the prospect of Chinese expansionism and develop a containment-like policy whereby it maintains high military readiness and responds to each Chinese challenge with immediate and costly retaliation. But whereas such a policy may have been appropriate during the Cold War, when Soviet capabilities challenged vital U.S. interests, the combination of geography and structure in post–Cold War East Asia suggests that Washington does not have to be hypersensitive to relative gains issues or to the prospect of Chinese military expansionism. In the twenty-first century, at current levels of defense spending and regional presence, the United States can promote its regional security interests and develop cooperative relations with China on a wide range of security and economic issues, contributing to a relatively peaceful and cooperative great power order.