

The Global Strategic Balance and Competition Among the Major Powers in East Asia

How to make and maintain global and regional peace and stability is an issue of great concern throughout the world.

1. Historical Experiences and Lessons

Traditionally, international and regional situation has been in general decided either by hegemony or equilibrium. When a single hegemonic power centre became mighty unmatched, it would enjoy omnipotence over the rest of the nations. When several powers reached a kind of balance of strength and could not conquer one another, there would strike some temporal peace or peaceful confrontation. As a result, wars of all kinds frequented with or without intervals, and there was no lasting peace and stability. That was particularly true with Europe in history. The core of both games has always been the dogma of "power decides" or power politics.

After international fascism was defeated in the Second World War, there appeared two antagonistic blocs headed respectively by the two superpowers—the Soviet Union and the United States. The whole world was plunged into the period of cold war and the contending for global domination between the two superpowers loomed large everywhere. Owing to the fierce confrontation between the two blocs, people of the world lived under a tense international atmosphere for nearly half a century. The disintegration of the Soviet Union brought to an end the world bipolar structure as well as the cold war. But the cold war mentality remains strong in the minds of some people, notably in the United States. As the only superpower, the US has proclaimed itself the world leader and tried to build a new world order with American domination. Over the years, the US has attempted to start a new type of Crusade with an overrunning faith in the ability of American values and power to rapidly transform the world by playing unilateralism. Since early 1990s, the US has launched four large-scale wars, namely the Gulf war, the Kosovo war, the Afghanistan war and the Iraq war. Whatever the judgment and evaluation of those wars, one fact is clear to all: They have failed to bring solid stability to those regions and real peace

to the world. On the whole, the world people, including the American people, have not felt more secured but rather less safe.

With unilateralism getting into a death end, some people have tried to advocate assembling so-called "alliance of democracies" or "democracy concert" or "arc of freedom and prosperity". Some even suggest that the assembly could replace the role of the United Nations if UN fails to function effectively. Those trends of thoughts are fundamentally in the wrong direction for at least two reasons. One, there is no absolute criterion accepted universally to judge which country is a "democracy" and which is not. Two, if some countries labeled arbitrarily as democracies are put into an alliance and try to lord it over other countries, that would only lead to the division of the international community and give rise to new conflicts and hostility. Obviously, they are but the out-of-dated thinking of some countries rule and others ruled. It is not only out of the world reality but also dangerous.

Historical experiences have convincingly bore out the fact that the practice of power politics, either in the manner of hegemony or equilibrium, can not lead to lasting peace and genuine security. It is even less possible for it to cope effectively with the challenges of a deep-changing world.

2. Facing a World Under Profound and Complex Changes

Beyond any doubt, the world today is different in many ways from the past.

First, the world is moving towards multi-polarity. There exist far more power centres of various descriptions and all are players of varying influences in international arena. Apart from those traditional powers in the West, there are quite a number of newly emerging powers such as BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China) and other big developing countries. In addition, some country-groups such as EU, Asean, AU and others are also gaining importance. As a matter of fact, there are nearly 200 countries and each wants its voice heard. Their right is entitled to be respected. Consequently, no country or group of countries has the capability of manipulating world affairs alone. And it is also difficult to develop some power balance of a global scope, because those power centres hardly share same political, economic and cultural values and interests.

Second, countries in the present world are more heavily interdependent and their interests are much more interwoven and connected. Since the 1980s, economic globalization has promoted the process of world market integration and enhanced the degree of economic interdependence between nations. Meanwhile, economic integration has also made the contradictions of the existing international economic system exasperated and the global economic disparity worsened. Besides, great advances in information technology have further spurred the development of globalization and markedly transformed the global division of labour. But at the same time, it has also widened the technological disparity between the North and the South, often referred as the Digital Divide. Both opportunities and challenges brought about by globalization present themselves to all countries in the world, and problems evolved thereby should be dealt with by joint efforts of all countries concerned.

Third, the whole world is now under greater and more complicated security threats. While the "hot spots" of heritage are far from proper settlement, untraditional security threats of various kinds have become rampant. Some old-type untraditional issues as piracy, drug trafficking, money laundering and so on remain and terrorism and proliferation of MDW are still most serious. On top of those, problems of all other categories such as growing shortage of traditional energy, pollution, global warming, natural disasters and weird contagious diseases have become increasingly focuses of grave concern the world over. Those elements of insecurity are often interlinked and interacting, making them more dangerous. It is obvious that none of the issues can be solved by any individual country or with any single means.

Fourth, there is a strong demand for proper handling differences in culture. It is an objective reality that over two thousand ethnic groups live in about 200 countries throughout the world. Each of them has unique or different historical heritage, social morals and values, habits and customs and other cultural aspects. As human civilization is made of multiple cultures, it is so rich, colourful and splendid. On one hand, almost all countries at present time take development as their major task of great importance and desire substantial cooperation with outside world. On the other hand, they want strongly to keep their national cultural identity and dignity. Generally,

they are happy to learn from other culture but certainly not willing to be “transformed”. Sowing the seed of “civilization clash” will only harvest conflicts and harms.

These are the outstanding features of the world today. They point out clearly that any idea of essential power politics will not make a peaceful, stable and prosperous world.

3. Strategic Situation in East Asia

Asia has become a focus of world attention. Asia's economic development has been remarkable and admirable over the past a few decades. First Japan and then the “four tigers”, they have all created world wonders in economy. The rapid economic growth of China, India and others of the area has added new splendour. But many people of the world are very much concerned with Asia's future development. Their worries are not totally groundless.

First, there are too many strong powers in Asia now. There is a heavy concentration of influential countries and country-groups of the United States, China, India, Russia, Japan and others as well as Asean and SCO, and even Australia. In normal understanding, it is quite possible for them to engage in competition for leadership and interests.

Second, those powers are more or less different in political systems, ideology, domestic conditions, historical heritage and levels of development. Excepting the United States and Japan who are allies, all the rest have their own independent interests strategy. There are areas they share common or similar interests, but there are also areas they differ and even conflict in interests.

Third, some historical issues are still influential in their relations, particular China with Japan and ROK with Japan. There are some territorial disputes left over by history.

Fourth, China and Korea have not yet fulfilled the cause of national reunification, even though the two issues are not the one and same in nature.

All this could possibly lead to negative consequences. But there are more important elements that bind them together and propel their relations to move towards positive direction.

First, they share vital common interests in keeping the Asian area peaceful and stable. Take economic and trade field for example. Many of them, especially the US, China, Japan and ROK, are important mutual economic partners. Any serious adverse changes in the total situation in Asia could only bring great harms to their fundamental interests.

Second, as all Asian countries are concentrated in their economic development, they require sincerely a peaceful global and regional environment and mutually beneficial cooperation. Many of them have established some kind of strategic partnership relations.

Third, despite some differences, East Asian countries generally belong to the oriental civilization. They share many fine traditions, identical social values and culture, which help them, have better understanding of each other.

Fourth, through historical experiences and lessons, Asian countries have learned how best to handle their relations including differences. The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence initiated by China and India, and the Ten Principles of the Bandung Conference formatted by Asian-African states remain important in guiding relations among nations.

It is natural for a few people to cherish the ambition for leadership in Asia and some people to lay faith in the balance of power. But that is not the main trend of thought in Asia.

All countries are equals and masters of their own. Each has the right and obligation to contribute to the maintenance of peace and stability. When all matters can be consulted on equal footing, there is no reason that there should be a leader. And besides, who is qualified to a leader of all Asian countries? China has no intention at all to compete for leadership and certainly do not want to be lead by any other country. I do not think there is any Asian country desiring to be lead.

It is true that the balance of power sometimes can play a role of mutual control and restraint. But it is not an ideal or effective way to keep peace and stability. From the historical experiences in Europe and the period of the cold war, we could learn some bitter lessons. In order to keep balance, each side had to engage in hard

competition in a spiral manner, including an escalating arm race. That was what happened between the United States and the former Soviet Union. No country in Asia should follow that example, at least not China.

New situation calls for new concept of global and regional governance. It is much better to have an alliance of all nations in Asia for peace, development and cooperation, based on the principles of mutual trust, mutual respect, cooperation and mutual benefit.

4. China's Initiative for the Building of A Harmonious World

People all over the world are now keeping a close eye on China's development and some of them are quite suspicious of China's intention to the outside world. It is no surprise for people to feel concerned with a big country of 1.3 billion people at such a high growth rate. So there have been all kinds of fallacies of "China threat". Therefore, it is necessary and important to have a better understanding of China's development. Here I just stress a few points for your thinking.

First, peaceful development is the common desire and determined will of the entire Chinese people. What have decided China to take the road of peaceful development are its national conditions, cultural traditions, it's embracing of the global trend of development and its state nature. Peaceful development means that first of all, China relies mainly on its own efforts and resources in pursuing development but not on external plundering and expansion, and second the whole purpose of China's development is for the bitterness of Chinese people's material and cultural life. As a responsible country, China has spared no pains for lasting peace and common prosperity, but cherished no ambition for world domination or leadership in Asia.

Second, China has made great progresses in development over the nearly 30 years since reform and opening-up. But because of the large population, China is still a developing country. It is requiring the continued hard efforts of several or even dozens of generations before China becomes a strong and prosperous power in the true sense. Over a fairly long period of time, China's main attention remains on domestic affairs.

Third, China is fully aware that as a big and populous country its development

will enviably have influences on the outside world. China has constantly called for common development and prosperity in the world and stood firmly for win-win results in cooperation. China has never worked for its own interests at the cost of others and offered sincere assistance to less developing countries within its own capability.

Fourth, facing a world with numerous complicated challenges and problems, China has initiated the idea of building a harmonious world with lasting peace and common prosperity. That includes a series of positive suggestions such as the new approach of security, democratization of international relations, striving for win-win results in cooperation, solving differences and disputes by consultation but not by resorting to force or threatening the use of force, building relations of "good neighbours, good friends and good partners" with surrounding nations and so on and so forth.