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Hardly a day passes now without some mention being made of the importance of building a new world order. From this we can gather that the global community is keenly interested in the ongoing efforts to restructure international relations. Most notably, the nations of the European Community are undertaking a bold experiment in integration, and their efforts should have great bearing on the shape of the world to come. But how will the trends elsewhere influence developments in Asia? Specifically, is integration premised on the EC model possible in East Asia? Below, while exploring such questions, I will point to marked differences between Asia and Europe that make order building near Japan's shores much more difficult.

1. Countries with little in common

The old East Asian order, until it collapsed with the dawn of the modern era, was centered on China from ancient times. In this version of an international order, China's place was at the world's center, and all the surrounding lands were tributary states. Among the tributaries, who were subordinate in political status to the Chinese court, were the peoples on the Korean and Indochinese peninsulas, on the Ryukyu islands, and in Taiwan and Japan.

The situation was quite different in Europe, where the 1648 Peace of Westphalia heralded an age of nation-states. In this order, the main actors were nominally equivalent sovereign states that banded together in networks. The historical, caltural, and economic foundations of this order are the props of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the single European market, and former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's talk of a "common European house."

Because the Sinocentric order in Asia was rigidly hierarchical, its collapse in the early modern period left East Asia in a state of insufficient equality among countries for the formation of a European-style order. Japan

alone managed to join the ranks of the major powers, and it soon set its sights on its own new order, dubbing it the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. But in the end this turned into an excuse for invasions, and the scars they left in the hearts of the victims still rankle today. With these historical precedents, it is little wonder that talk of order building in East Asia has become something of a taboo. Any attempts to create a new regional oeder must first overcome this reluctance to discuss the topic.

Another obstacle is the wide disparities in the region. Politically speaking, China perhaps has the most clout. Certainly it has the biggest population; its 1.2 billion citizens many easily swell to 2 billion in the twenty-first century. China also has a mighty military, but now that the cold war has ended and the world is moving toward nuclear disarmament, it may be possible to discount differences in military power. China's weakness is in the economic sphere, where Japan is the region's superpower.

What measure should we lay the most emphasis on as we contemplate order-building efforts? I submit that the best single measure today is economic affluence. Specifically, I have in mind the wealth of each individual as indicatec by per capita gross national product. On this index Japan, which is closing in on a figure of $30,000 along with the world's richest countries, towers above China, where pe capita GNP is thought to be in the vicinity of $1, 000 by the year 2000 ——it set this target upon the adoption of the "Four Modernizations" plan——its achievement is no longer feasible because of, among other problems, population growth.

Hong Kong boasts the region's second highest per capita GNP with $12,000, followed by Singapore with $10,000. These two economies are exceptional cases, however; they are both small city-states that derive their income chiefly form finance and trade. Taiwan's economy is growing at a remarkable clip——a projcted 7% in 1991 ——and its per capita GNP has reached $8,500. It will only be a matter of time before it attains the $10,000 mark commonly seen as the entry level of the industrial nation. South Korea trails at around $4,500; while

its economy is not as developed as Taiwan's, it has considerable strength. The richer countries of the region have thus deared the $2,000 hardle, and at the same time they are enterling a phase of political and social maturity. Incidentally, the North Koreans say that they are approaching $4,000, but the actual figure is believed to be no more than $2,000 even by the most generous of estimates.

These GNP figures provide just one indication of the vast differences in the East Asia region. The stage a country has reached in economic development affects the business activities and social life of its citizens, and it also has an impact on other countries mediated by currency values and economic exchange. A gap in wealth between two neighbors can have profound effects. Right now Guangdong Province in China is being rejuvenated by exchange with Hong Kong, while Fujian Province is being similarly affected by Taiwan.

If the disparities in East Asia are too great for building a regional order at present, we should concern ourselves with efforts to narrow the gaps. One of the biggest gap is that between socialist contries and free-market democracies. Will it indeed be possible for such fundamentally opposed economic and political systems to coexist over the long run? In this regard, the countries of Europe had already developed a working regional order before they were divided by the iron curtain into East and West. Even so, disparities in the level of economic development emerged during the long years of the cold war. Eventually they become so great as to topple the Berlin Wall, leading to the assimilation of East Germany by the Bonn government. Will a similar scenario unfold in East Asia? The answer to this question will hinge on developments in China.

2. The unraveling of the Chinese regime

The socialist regime in Beijing is already unraveling, and the process of change has begun from within. But it is inconceivable that a country as large as China could be quickly assimilated into the Western camp. On the contrary,

China may yet have the potential to reassert a Sinocentric order on East Asia, as unlikely as this might seem at present.

Beijing's chief concern today is damming the tidal wave of democratization that washed over the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Maintaining socialism as a viable political system will not, however, be an easy task. The impact of the reform process in Europe has already been felt in every stratum of Chinese society.

In China's special economic zones, where Taiwanese and other investors havemade their influence felt, socialism is in full retreat. Though the Chinese Communist Party is still holding the country together from its headquarters in Beijing, its defensive measures are breeding internal contradictions. Since the war in the Persian Gulf Beijing has taken a hard-line stance of labeling all contact with the Western industrial world "warfare without gunpowder." But if this warfare is taken to mean that even economic exchange with the West must be stopped, it will come into conflict with China's decade-old open-door policy. Such are the dilemmas confronting the communist regime.

Then there is the problem of ethnic unrest. Tibet has long resisted Beijing's rule, and Chinese Turkestan is also seeking self-determination. The recent democratization measures in Mongolia, moreover, could encourage people in Inner Mongolia to demand similar reforms. The shape of an East Asian order may thus be significantly affected by the process of realignment that China is likely to undergo the coming years.

The power vacuum that will be created when aging leader Deng Xiaoping steps aside may mark the beginning of the end. The monolithic CCP administration may break apart, and socialism may be rejected. Hong Kong's reversion to Chinese rule in 1977 may trigger this chang--although the dismantling of China could begin before that.

3. Uncertainties in China's neighbors

If and when the existing regime collapses, Taipei will no doubt seek footholds on the mainland. In the meantime, it will prepare itself in all possible ways --as by introducing constitutional changes--for the day when it can spread the Taiwanese way of life into China. At the same time, though, the opposition Democratic Progressive Party and other forces have recently been rejecting the "one China" ideology. Their bid to make Taiwan an independent country will bear close watching.

The 20 million residents of Taiwan are now rethinking their identity. Having witnessed the breakkup of the Soviet Union, the successful campaign for independence in the Baltic republics, and the admission of both North and South Korea into the United Nations, many of them have quite naturally begun to question the assumption by the ruling Kuomintang that Taiwan and China must, some day, be unified. Thanks to Taiwan's gradual emergence as a multiparty domocracy over the past few years, it has become possible for a party like the DPP to broach the taboo topic of Taiwanese independence.

Even within the DPP, however, the fervent advocates of independence are in the minority. Under new Chairman Hsu Hsingliang , the general view appears to be one of support for independence if that is what Taiwanese residents decide they want. In the Kuomintang, meanwhile, the younger, more moderate members who are replacing the aging "lifetime" members--those who fled from the mainland in 1949--admit that the island is, by all unofficial measures, independenct of the mainland. They see no need to make this formal, since such a step might provoke Beijing into attempting to take back Taiwan by force. This wait-and-see attitude toward the changes brewing on the mainland has considerable popular support.

Taiwan is a rising international power. Its ties with other countries are growing stronger even in the absence of diplomatic relations. Most Taiwanese seem satisfied with the status quo, and probably fewer than one in five actively endorses independence. This is not to say that the independence movement has little meaning. It has given a jolt to domestic politics, and it can be used as

a potent bargaining chip in relations with China. For Taiwan to chart a separate path from the mainland would have great ramifications for China. Already, though, the possibilities are very remote that Beijing can lure Taiwan back by promising to leave its institutions intact, much less that Taiwan will accept a socialist setup.

Hong Kong has even more reason to be worried about the future than Taiwan. Dispite its apparent economic prosperity, it is plagued by the uncertainties of what 1997 will bring. In this regard, it is significant that anti-Beijing activists captured most of the 18 directly elected seats in the 60-member Legislative Council in the September 1991 elections. They were the ones who rallied some 2 million people in Hong Kong to demonstrate against Beijing's June 1989 crack-down on Tiananmen Square, changing that "the Beijing of today is the Hong Kong of tomorrow."

The region's three socialist regimes ——China, North Korea, and Vietnam ——all stand on very shaky footing. And of the three, Vietnam is likely to be the first to crumble. Already, the Hanoi-installed Cambodian regime has decided to change its party name, removing the word *revolutionary* from what was the People's Revolutionary Party. With the signing of an agreement on a political settlement of the Cambodian conflict in Paris last month, President and party Secretary General Heng Samrin has laid the groundwork for multiple parties, a market-led economy, and a democratic system of government. Such a change in the Hanoi-backed regime just across the border could lead to reform developments in Vietnam proper. Henceforth Hanoi may turn liss to Moscow or Beijing for help and instead align itself with its neighbors in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and with the dynamic economies of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan.

4. Starting at the grass-roots level

In the face of these developments, what role should Japan play as the

region's biggest economic power? Some want it to thrust itself forward as a political leader. It could, for example, demand a bigger voice in the United Nations, arguing that the New York-based organization is hindering the creation of an East Asian order by giving China——a veto-holding permanent member of the Security Council ——too much say in the management of world affairs. And it also might champion the creation of a new political organization for Asia, one that is independent of the United Nations and that embodies the spirit of regionalism. The problem, though, is that Japan's neighbors are not willing to let Tokyo call the shots.

Most of them are now coming to realize that Japan's remilitarization is not in the cards. But the ghost of the Greater East Co-Prosperity Sphere still haunts those who were victimised by Japan's military aggression, and it may take another half century for Japanese to regain other countries' trust. There is also great resistance to giving Tokyo political clout in the region in addition to its overwhelming economic might.

In thinking about Japan's regional role, we need to ask whether it would make sense to scrap the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty, which has guided Tokyo's Asian policy thus far. Since the bilateral security pact was predicated on the Soviet threat, we are bound to hear calls for its abrogation now that this threat is fast receding. Still, it is doubtful that Japan will be able to do without the treaty anytime soon. Though the Japan-U.S. relationship is a complicated one marked by numerous economic disputes, a decision to part ways could invite as much regional instability as a decision by Taiwan to pursue independence.

Japan will therefore have to continue working within the limits permited by the U.N. setup, the regional resintance to a Japanese-led order, and the Japan-U.S. secury pact, and its ability to exercise political leadership in East Asia will be curtailed as a result. In this respect as well, the prospects for dramatic progress in fashioning a radically new regional order are not very bright. The time is not yet ripe for lofty ideals and grand designs. What we

should instead focus on is exchange at the grass-roots level to lay a foundation for order-building efforts in the future.

One of the main causes of instability in the world today is ethnic unrest. This, along with the bankruptry of the socialist-style economy, tore the Soviet Union apart, and it is now dismembering Yugoslavia. With all its minority groups, China is likely to encounter its own ethnic problems in the future. To reduce such disturbances, we need to develop cross-ethnic networks of exchange that transcend national borders.

Two month ago the third Asia Open Forum was held in Taipei, and among those attending the conference to discuss the political situation in East Asia was Morihiko Hiramatsu, the governor of Oita Prefecture in Kyushu. As it happens, Oita has long had active ties with Kaohsiung, one of Taiwan's main administrative divisions, and it also fast expanding its ties with Russia. This puts it in a position to coordinate exchange among Taiwanese, Russians, and Japanese, making use of such gatherings as the Asia Open Forum. Heretofore the links within Asia have been those from state to state, and they have relied on such institutions as United Nations and been constrained by such considerations as the one-China policy. Now, however, networks among local governments are opening up new possibilities.

5. Wariness of Japanese leadership

The countries of East Asia, especially those with a Confucian tradition, have high literacy rates. Their economic and social foundations seem well suited to the "knowledge-intensive" production needs of the information age. But for this very reason, they must be careful to avoid moves that set them apart form the rest of the world. If they appear to be advocating "neo-Asianism," they will provoke a stinging backlash. And if the Japanise were to demand for themselves the starring role in the East Asian sphere, the consequences would be even more devastating.

Admittedly Japan has been heavily influenced by Asian value standards. But it is also a fact that the Japanese, at least since the end of World War II, have come to share such Western-born and universally applicable values as freedom and domocracy. In politics and in diplomacy, it is these values we should be promoting. Unfortunately, our record in this respect leaves much to be disired. When Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu visited Beijing in August 1991, for example, he laid a wreath at the Monument to the the People's Heroes in Tiananmen Square. The choice of this particular site, where the prodemocracy demonstrators had been forcibly suppressed two years earlier, for a public ceremony was indicative of Japan's insensitivity to human rights issues. In a similar vein, Japan's treatment of the "boat people" who have arrived here seems to indicate that it will not grant protection to political refugees. In these and other areas, we must acknowledge and rectify the shortcomings in our attitudes.

One of Hong Kong's key relationships is that with Japan. But when an international symposium was held in Hong Kong last year to discuss the future of the British colony and China, the topic of the ties between Hong Kong and Japan was ommited from the agenda. The reason for the omission was that many people in Hong Kong would rather not see Japan get involved in the planning for Hong Kong's and East Asia's future.

This incident is symbolic of the mistrust with which Japan is viewed by its neghbors. The countries of East Asia are not just worried about a remilitalized Japan. They are also disturbed by the prospect of a new regional order in which Japan acts as the leader. In the unfolding East Asian drama, we must never lose sight of this widely shared sentiment.