ASSESSING THE NATURE OF CHINA'S RISE: BEYOND THE LIBERALISM VS. REALISM DICHOTOMY

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The recent ascent of China as a major regional power has generated much debate on the future of East Asia, as many scholars have pondered the question of whether other nations will seek to balance against its power or accept the current hierarchy. David Kang, in his book *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia* (hereafter, *China Rising*), argues that China's many East Asian neighbors have welcomed its rise as a stabilizing force for the region, and in fact have taken an active role in solidifying their ties with China. He claims that besides material factors, ideological factors also play a critical role in determining the positions of different states and may serve as a better indicator of the future of international relations involving China. His analysis of the East Asian response to the rise of China is powerful and compelling because of his decision to consciously craft a separate framework of the Asian experience instead of simply relying on the historical experience of Europe. His discussion of South Korea as a specific case study further buttresses his argument that many countries have consciously decided to accommodate the rise of China. However, his line of reasoning also lends itself to criticism because it overestimates the impact of historical legacy as the primary driver of East Asian politics; furthermore, it exhibits a selection bias by cherry-picking countries that prove Kang's thesis.

Perhaps the greatest strengths of this book are Kang's criticisms of conventional international relations theory and his insistence on developing a better-informed framework to analyze East Asian international relations. He extensively investigates the historical experience of the region to account for the accommodation of China's rise by many of its neighbors. Previous theories on the rise and fall of hegemonic states have focused on the European experience, thereby rendering them less relevant to the historical experiences of Asia. Real-

ist theory (larger states will threaten smaller states) or liberal theory (increasing trade will lead to less conflict) remain largely irrelevant to East Asian politics, especially because early modern Asia was marked by stable hegemonic dominance yet did not enjoy remarkable stability (p. 49). Instead, East Asian hegemonic stability "was a function not only of power and size, but also a complex set of norms and behavior that governed international relations between the main political units (p. 49)." Unlike Europe, East Asia did not experience many wars between 1300-1900, and war for conquest was even rarer. Furthermore, so long as Asian nations signaled their respect towards China by kowtowing, China let its neighbors control their own internal affairs (p. 37). Hence, Kang argues that to not pay attention to the specific characteristics of East Asia's past "is at best an oversight; at worst it reveals an unwillingness to engage the reality of East Asia's own dynamics (p. 23)." Kang rightfully claims that the study of China and its influence on the East Asian region deserves a separate treatment that doesn't rely on standard international relation theories; his argument is subtle and nuanced, accounting for the complexities of East Asian regional politics by raising issues with the liberalism vs. realism dichotomy.

Kang's discussion of South Korea as the paradigmatic case is particularly well constructed. He argues that while the US- Korea alliance "provides South Korea with a strong ally, South Korean planning has not been focused on a potential threat from China (p. 55)." Kang further supports his argument by explaining that South Korean military strategy and spending have remained consistent over the past decade. Nonetheless, his strongest point is that South Korea's decision to embrace China is reflected strongly in the political sphere; according to a survey of South Korea's National Assembly in 2004, 55 percent of newly elected members selected China as South Korea's most important diplomatic partner in the future, while 42 percent of previously elected members also chose China (p. 56). From my personal experiences growing up in Korea, I agree that the US is often seen as more of a threat to Korean interests than China, leading to the South Korean government's willingness to consider the rise of China as somewhat beneficial. For example, South Korea is frequently racked by anti-American protests on different issues, such as the relocation of the military base at Yongsan or the beef import clauses of the proposed Korea-US Free Trade Agreement. However, anti-Chinese protests either do not figure prominently in Korean activism or do not receive the substantial amount of coverage that anti-American protests attract. Although the causes of anti-American protests are diverse and of varying degrees of concern, the fact of the matter is that many Koreans are less critical of China's attitudes and goals while simulta-

neously disapproving of US ambitions in the region. In other words, while many South Koreans are not completely enamored with Chinese intentions, they still believe that the US is an even worse partner that continually fails to appreciate the importance of the US-ROK alliance. Moreover, China and South Korea share a common grievance against Japan, including annual visits by its prime ministers (except for current Prime Minister Naoto Kan) to the Yasukuni Shrine to honor Japan's war dead, which includes war criminals. The cultural affinity that binds China and Korea together partially accounts for why South Korea "is moving most obviously to engage China and to embrace its emergence (p. 56)." Thus, the case of South Korea clearly illustrates an example of a country seeking an active role in maintaining its relationship with China instead of trying to balance it.

Ironically, the book also runs the risk of relying excessively on the historical experience of East Asia as the primary driver of China's identity and ambitions. Kang briefly acknowledges this issue in the conclusion, stressing, "Chinese and East Asian identities are still in the process of being determined…there is no immutable 'Chinese mind-set' just as there are no immutable perceptions of China (p. 201)." Referring to the unique historical legacy of the Sino-centric tributary system as a general guiding principle for international relations has its advantages, as discussed previously in this review; however, it should not be the primary argument supporting the claim that East Asian states have actually welcomed China's rise, especially in light of recent developments. Referring to the history of the region as a key influence in its future is certainly a valid approach, but it does not account for the unpredictability of international relations, as new events constantly arise and countries are constantly adjusting. Although China has consistently emphasized its intentions of a peaceful rise without upsetting the current world order, recent events actually suggest that China has sought to carve out a bigger role for itself. Many critics have claimed that China has become increasingly assertive and confident, as seen through events such as the G-20 Summit in London and the financial crisis of 2008-09. In fact, the world's attention was focused on the so-called 'G-2' summit between Barack Obama and Hu Jintao as much, if not more, than the actual G-20 summit. A *New York Times* article on the G-20 summit stated that China arrived "with a sense of momentum, riding a wave of nationalism and boasting an economy that, more than any other, is surfing the trough of a crippling recession."[1] Following a

1 Michael Wines and Edward Wong, "An Unsure China Steps Onto the Global Stage," *New York Times*, April 1, 2009, accessed September 2, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/02/world/asia/02china.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=china%20g-20&st=cse.

similar strand of thought, *The Economist* reported in March 2009 that "although in public China's leaders eschew triumphalism, there is a sense in Beijing that the reassertion of the Middle Kingdom's global ascendancy is at hand."[2] Recent events suggest that China is willing to flex its diplomatic muscles more than ever, as evidenced by China's decision to withhold the export of rare-earth minerals after Japan arrested the captain of a Chinese fishing boat in disputed waters in the East China Sea in September. Furthermore, many countries including South Korea have grown increasingly frustrated by China's perceived lack of effort in restraining North Korea, especially in light of recent North Korean actions such as the shelling of Yeonpyong Island and the sinking of the South Korean naval ship Cheonanham in 2009. Perhaps Kang should have devoted more time to detailing how Asia's future might not resemble its past, since others have argued that the Asian landscape has acquired new characteristics.[3] The very unpredictability of international relations renders it impossible to solely reference historical experience to explain contemporary East Asian politics.

Kang's argument about China's peaceful rise would be greatly strengthened through a related discussion on the US reaction to the earlier rise of Japan, especially because he argues that East Asian nations should be treated separately from previous European great powers. The "Japanophobia" of the 1980s and early 1990s that gripped the US[4] in fact resembles the current alarmist attitudes that are decidedly pessimistic of China's rise. During this period, Japan's increasing bilateral trade surplus and foreign exchange reserves were interpreted as "'proof' of its manipulated currency and mercantilist attitude,"[5] America's "paranoia" towards Japan was exacerbated when its jobless rate increased and the Japanese acquired landmarks like the Rockefeller Center.[6] According to an *Economist* article, China should cause less concern than Japan because its economy "is far more open" and "is already American's fastest-growing export market."[7] The current charges leveled by some members of Congress towards China greatly resemble the arguments against Japan a decade ago, and now China is "a scapegoat for broader economic anxieties to do with stagnant wages,

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2 "How China sees the world," *The Economist*, March 19, 2009, accessed September 2, 2009, http://www.economist.com/opinion/displayStory.cfm?story_id=13326106.

3 Amitav Acharya, "Will Asia's Past Be Its Future?," *International Security* 28, no. 3 (Winter 2003/04).

4 "America's fear of China: Trade and the economy," *Economist*, May 19, 2007, accessed September 2, 2009, http://www.economist.com/opinion/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_JTRJSGD.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

rising income inequality, and dwindling health and pension benefits."[8] In fact, during the 2010 mid-term elections campaign, many politicians were quick to scapegoat China for the loss of jobs, and at least 29 candidates ran campaigns that suggested their political rivals were too sympathetic towards China.[9] Therefore, the parallels between the alarmist attitude toward Japan decades ago and the alarmist attitude toward China today reveal that rising powers are oftentimes viewed through a phobic lens regardless of their identities and intentions.

Furthermore, Kang's focus on East Asian nations could be expanded to test his theory on countries accommodating the rise of China rather than balancing it. There are many other countries that have an equally compelling stake in the future of China, such as India and Russia, that are not properly addressed in Kang's work. His book defines the East Asian region as Northeast Asia (mainly Japan, China and the two Koreas) and Southeast Asia (Taiwan, ASEAN States, Australia and New Zealand)(p. 11). Hence, when Kang states that he has excluded extra-regional states such as India and Russia in his analysis because "they don't share the same basic views or interests as those within East Asia itself (p. 11)," he reveals a sample bias. He also points to India's lack of direct impact in the region and its peripheral interest as further reason for not defining it as an East Asian state (p. 12). However, I believe that Kang's somewhat understandable exclusion of India is problematic to the extent that India represents a case in which a country is acutely uncomfortable with China's rise; hence, discussing India's reactions to the increasing influence of China would shed light on the exceptions to the rule and offer a more well-rounded approach, although such change would substantially alter the scope of the study. Some claim "India has always been uncomfortable with China's rise"; Nehru, India's first prime minister stated, before and after the Indo-China War of 1962, that India's natural competitor for leadership in Asia would be China.[10] India's defense minister singled out China, instead of Pakistan, as the country's 'threat number one,' even after the 1998 nuclear tests by India and Pakistan.[11] In short, the perception of China by nations outside its immediate sphere of influence deserve scrutiny, especially in countries like India that have their own ambitious agenda of becoming a leader in the greater Asian region. In response to this suggestion, Kang has countered that "rather than a comprehensive overview of China's rela-

8 Ibid.

9 David W. Chen, "China Emerges as a Scapegoat in Political Ads," *New York Times*, October 9, 2010, accessed November 20, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/us/politics/10outsource.html.

10 Jalal Alamgir, "Book Review Roundtable: David C, Kang: China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia," *Asia Policy*, no. 6 (July 2008): 163.

11 Ibid.

tions with every global actor, this book was written instead as a regional-level view on how states most directly interact with China…India is not yet a major economic or diplomatic presence in East Asia (p. 173)."

In conclusion, *China Rising* offers a solid thesis accounting for the relatively peaceful rise of China in the region because of a shared identity with Sino-centric roots. His arguments are fresh and innovative, challenging contemporary international relations theories by examining why they remain irrelevant in the East Asian case. He offers convincing case studies to further support this thesis, and his selection of South Korea as a paradigmatic case is particularly apt. However, his book also suffers from many gaps that weaken his central argument; Kang's analysis perhaps depends too much on historical legacies as an explanation for why many East Asian countries have chosen to accommodate the rise of China. Furthermore, his analysis would have been bolstered by the inclusion of other countries like India that have expressed pessimism towards the peaceful rise of China. **PEAR**