

‘Power’ and ‘Stability’ in the China-Japan-South Korea Regional Security Complex

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Abstract Despite continuing economic liberalization and social integration, relations between Northeast Asian governments are often tense and lead to enhanced military readiness. Alongside confrontation in all three dyads, however, trilateral cooperation between China, Japan and South Korea has been evolving. This study shows that history problems, territorial disputes and geopolitical concerns lock the Chinese, Japanese and South Korean governments into a constellation that creates political space for the emergence of cooperative frameworks. In order to understand these regional dynamics and the influence of extra-regional actors such as the United States on Northeast Asian politics, however, it is necessary to apply a differentiated concept of power. The very fixation on material power and bilateral relationships reveals that power is being exercised in non-material ways in effect foreclosing alternative futures and reproducing existing structures including the pertaining security dilemmas.

The Simultaneity of Conflict and Cooperation in Northeast Asia

Despite strong political emphasis on the promotion of (peaceful) economic development and the ensuing deepening of socio-economic interdependencies, relations between Northeast Asian governments have over the last years stagnated if not deteriorated. However, in spite of Asia ‘becoming increasingly militarized,’ trilateral cooperation between China, Japan and South Korea has been evolving (IISS 2012: 205).

How could trilateralism emerge in such a tense environment? How significant are trilateral initiatives? Conversely, are we going to see a deepening division of Northeast Asia between rising and declining, democratic and authoritarian states? In light of these uncertainties commonly attributed to a power shift, what do calls for stability mean and what do they tell us about our conceptualization of change in Northeast Asia more generally?

Based on the comparative analysis of the most contentious issues in the China-Japan, Japan-South Korea and South Korea-China dyads, this study finds that while nationalisms continue to foster antagonistic bilateral relations, the trilateral constellation of amity-enmity patterns locks Beijing, Tokyo and Seoul into a security complex (Buzan and Wæver 2003) that provides political space for the emergence of regional cooperation evident in emerging trilateral frameworks. Neither did materially more powerful actors necessarily coerce and prevail over weaker ones, nor was there clear and consistent balancing or bandwagoning behaviour. This insight not only questions

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the validity of power transition, hegemonic stability and democratic peace theories but also raises the issue of how to analyze identity conflicts manifest in clashing nationalisms beyond the bilateral dimension. Moreover, the study offers a deeper explanation of how power structures both hinder and enable cooperation between regional state actors. It demonstrates that material conceptions of power create tunnel visions centred on great power politics and bilateralism, thereby precluding alternative explanations of regional politics while reproducing established identity conceptions. Therefore, the application of a differentiated concept of power provides a better means to understand political change in Northeast Asia.

Since the mid-1990s, relations among Northeast Asian governments tend to become increasingly conflictual. A recent survey revealed that in the period from 2007 to 2011 the five largest importers of conventional weapons were all in Asia, up 24 % compared to the 2002-2006 period. South Korea ranked second and China fourth (Holtom *et al.* 2012). Defence budgets of China, South Korea and the United States increased while Japan, still the world's sixth largest spender, has been transforming its armed forces from territorial defence toward expeditionary missions (IISS 1995). Since the 2005 stand-off in the East China Sea (ECS) in particular, Tokyo has reoriented its defence posture from defence against a northern threat toward the Southwest and further bolstered what are Asia's most potent naval forces (MOD 2013). This shift included repeated exercises, often with United States (US) forces in defending and retaking outer islands ostensibly aimed at increasing Chinese presence in the Western Pacific (Asahi Shimbun 2013a). Not the least with an eye on Japan, South Korea has been significantly increasing its defence expenditures and has not missed the turn to the seas (Chosun Ilbo 2012a). Moreover, in light of the continued emphasis on bilateral military alliances with Japan and South Korea as well as cooperation with Southeast Asian partners during the Bush administration and the recent 'pivot' or 'rebalancing' toward the Asia-Pacific by the Obama administration, proponents are hard-pressed to explain why reinforced US presence has not been accompanied by greater stability.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, economics and politics are difficult to separate and rational behaviour in the conduct of foreign and security politics is not a given. In the wake of disputes over the delimitation of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and territorial sovereignty, communication between governments broke down, imported goods were shunned and partially violent popular protests erupted (Asahi Shimbun 2012a). A number of voices started to argue that, in light of economic asymmetries, the negative impact would be much more severe for Japan than China, and retaliatory measures therefore useful tools (Xinhua 2012). The Japanese ambassador to China at the time explicitly condemned the 'extreme view' that the Chinese economy can get along without Japan stating that 'such opinions represent a very arrogant attitude toward the economy' (Okudera 2012).

Against this background, the phenomenon of intergovernmental cooperation developing alongside increasingly antagonistic relations among China, Japan and South Korea is surprising and the scant attention it has received is puzzling. Since December 2008 China-Japan-South Korea (CJK) summits have been convened annually. The process most recently culminated in the establishment of a Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat in Seoul in September 2011. In this respect, CJK can be said to have further advanced than the Association of Southeast Asian Nations plus China, Japan and South

Korea (ASEAN+3) framework (Qin and Wei 2008). Moreover, the three economy ministers in May 2012 signed an Agreement for the Promotion, Facilitation and Protection of Investment. The trilateral framework is currently being pushed forward through negotiations of a trilateral free-trade agreement (MOFA 2013a). These formalized institutions emerged on the background of a wide range of trilateral activities, which encompass 50 consultative mechanisms including 18 ministerial-level frameworks and over a 100 cooperative projects (TCS 2013). In short, neither pessimistic approaches with their focus on power shift nor optimistic analyses of regional cooperation are sufficient for the analysis of recent developments that are characterized by the simultaneous accentuation of conflict *and* cooperation.

Following the discussion of existing explanations of cooperation and conflict in the next section, I show how contentions over historical recognition do not only hinder normalization of bilateral relations but in the trilateral setting also help to prevent further deepening of the East-West divide within Northeast Asia. In the fourth section I demonstrate that maritime territorial disputes, which contribute to the intensification and institutionalization of clashing nationalisms, prevent hegemonic dominance by one actor. In the fifth section, I discuss how perceived geopolitical imperatives, besides confrontational effects, also restrain decision-makers in Beijing, Tokyo and Seoul in their pursuit of national security interests. Last, I argue that the constellation of interlocking, confrontational national interests pursued in bilateral relations provide space for the emergence of cooperative frameworks at the regional level. This finding raises several questions of how conceptions of power determine theorizing and practice of Northeast Asian politics.

Theorizing Change in Northeast Asia

Overshadowed by research on relations between great powers, Washington's alliance relationships with Seoul and Tokyo and studies of ASEAN-centred regionalism, international relations (IR) literature has been rather silent when it comes to the explanation of relations between South Korea and its two neighbours and their implications for Northeast Asian international politics. The frequent foci on triangles, which by default include the US and exclude either Korea or China is another manifestation of this phenomenon.¹ As a consequence, analysts fail to take into account fundamental commonalities between China, Japan and South Korea: Historical amity and enmity, cultural and civilizational similarities, models of state-guided economic development, and geographical proximity apparent in ecological interdependence constitute Northeast Asia as a regional security complex (RSC) overlaid by US power (Buzan and Wæver 2003). This conceptualization allows for separate perspectives on intra-regional dynamics and their interplay with extra-regional factors. However, when it comes to show how the various factors and levels come together in leading to change in international relations, the approach falls back to static descriptions of altering polarities among territorially precisely delineated regional and national units classified according to their power status defined in material terms, and the determining roles of great powers. Limited to the discussion of effects of power shifts on specific bilateral

relations among great powers, other explanations of conflict bear less insights and need not be rehearsed here.

Analyses that are less pessimistic and focus more on cooperation, adopt regional perspectives. David Kang (2007) showed that inconsistencies in what he terms Western-centred IR theorizing led to overly pessimistic accounts of East Asian futures. As recent developments suggest, however, his interpretation of events swung toward the other extreme essentially replacing pessimistic views characterized by balancing against China with an optimistic one in which Asian states bandwagon with China.

Beyond the balancing-bandwagoning dichotomy, while seeing the keys in the hands of Chinese and Japanese leaders, Rozman (2004: 3, 349) recognizes the 'pivotal position' of South Korea. He finds that because of 'modernization without sufficient globalization,' nationalism has been prevailing over regionalism. Thus, the question is how narratives of national identity and the contingent antagonistic relations including the pertaining threat perceptions may or may not alter. Integration of political communities is predicated upon a positive, dynamic and reciprocal relationship between the structure of the region defined in material power and knowledge, and social processes defined by organizations, transactions, and social learning (Adler and Barnett 1998). Adler and Barnett contend that power understood as the authority that determines shared meaning plays a major role in the development and maintenance of a security community. Powerful states, however, do not create security *per se*. Rather, because of the positive image of security or material progress that is associated with powerful and successful states, security communities can form around them (Adler and Barnett 1998).

Since both Beijing and Washington vie for spheres of influence in the Western Pacific, sub-regional groupings aimed at restraining a hegemon (Hurrell 1995) have, unlike in Southeast Asia, not emerged. Therefore, termed ASEAN centrality, Southeast Asian states have commonly perceived themselves as being in 'the driver's seat' of regional cooperation (Ho 2012). While competition between Beijing, Tokyo and Seoul for influence in ASEAN-based regional projects generated positive dynamics such as exemplified by the ASEAN+1 and ASEAN+3 frameworks (Breslin 2010; Nabers 2010), trilateral cooperation among China, Japan and South Korea follows different logics. Agenda-setting was often determined by Seoul (Pieczara 2012). The Kim Dae-Jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations in particular promoted East Asian regionalism as a means to overcome Korea's uncomfortable position of 'a shrimp among whales' (Shim 2009). A closer look behind the official rhetoric of regional cooperation in non-traditional security issues, however, reveals that neo-functionalism and transactionalism can hardly account for more than the improvement of atmospherics at diplomatic meetings. The reason is that, apart from the protection of state-centred notions of security, Northeast Asian governments put utmost premium on economic growth, and they do this through mercantilist lenses (Wirth 2010).

This conflict-prone and rapidly evolving political environment led to the mantra of stability. Even studies that put emphasis on non-traditional security issues, the need for institution-building and the promotion of democracy and open markets equate stability with a continued, 'robust' presence of the United States for the purpose of deterrence and the maintenance of the status quo (Campbell, Patel and Singh 2008; Nishihara 2012; Tellis 2011; Yan 2010). As with the concept of power, however, stability is rarely

defined beyond an abstract balance of power, let alone operationalized (Choi and Moon 2011).

Notions of power shift, balance of power, and balance of threat are, despite conceptual differences, essentially based on material definitions of power. What drives the discourse is the size of national economies and their (projected) relative changes extrapolated from gross domestic product (GDP) growth rates (Beckley 2011/12). The dominant view is that a rising and therefore inherently revisionist, assertive China challenges the stable status quo of US hegemony and threatens Japan (DoD 2012; NIDS 2012).

Thus, power shift is constituted by what Lukes (2005) terms one-dimensional view of power. It is based on the claim that the exercise of power can be observed by analysing behaviour, that is, by looking at what decisions are taken. A more sophisticated, two-dimensional view takes into account that power can also be exercised by keeping issues out of decision-making processes. Even though the second view goes beyond quantifying potentials, both conceptualizations of power are incomplete because they presume an observable conflict of interests. This is apparent in definitions such as by Keohane and Nye (2001) for whom power is ultimately about making another actor do or want something that it would otherwise not. This linear, one-directional conceptualization of power creates a 'theoretical tunnel vision' (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 40), which lies at the core of the hierarchy vs. anarchy, balancing vs. bandwagoning and democratic vs. authoritarian dichotomies. Therefore, rather than to try to operationalize a single, 'correct' definition of power, it is important to be aware that power simultaneously works in different ways in several dimensions. This requires us to understand power as a relational quality. Consequently, it is not only material capabilities but also systems of knowledge and discursive practice that need to be taken into account (Barrett 2002; Guzzini 2000; Mann 2012). Barnett and Duvall (2005) suggest a fourfold taxonomy of power along two dimensions: the kinds of social relations through which power works; and the specificity of social relations through which effects on actor's capacities are produced. Of the four partially overlapping conceptions of power: compulsory; institutional; structural, and productive, the first and fourth are particularly relevant for the purpose of this study. Compulsory power corresponds with Lukes' (2005) one-dimensional view. Due to its reliance on capabilities it inherently focuses on great power relations. In contrast, productive power that is 'the constitution of all social subjects with various social powers through systems of knowledge and discursive practice' goes beyond material capabilities and linear, unidirectional relations of power (Lukes 2005: 55).

With the partial exception of soft power - which is often approached from the material angle of available 'resources', too - IR literature on Northeast Asia does not usually distinguish between compulsory and institutional power. Therefore, I will in the following refer to both as conceptions of material power. In contrast, structural power as defined by Barnett and Duvall involves a difficult and therefore lengthy discussion of justice. Since my argument is more fundamental than questions of domination of other states by a great or superpower, or the injustice and equality caused by differential power of a certain government over competing domestic interests, I limit the discussion below to the contrast between material power and productive power.

On the one hand, material power should manifest itself in that China, according to the conventional IR discourse the most powerful actor, is able to impose its preferences on Japan and South Korea, while Japanese national interests are expected to prevail over South Korean ones. Moreover, power shift predicts that China's relations with both Japan and South Korea are clearly more conflict prone, while Tokyo and Seoul align themselves against rising China. On the other hand, productive power should be manifest in discourses that frame recent developments in ways which reinforce rather than question existing political orders both at the international and at the domestic levels. Examples are the continuing relevance of bilateral security alliances and emphasis on the threat of Japanese militarism.

With this broadened horizon, it becomes possible to adopt different perspectives on cooperation and conflict while at the same time critically reflect upon mainstream views on changing Northeast Asia. First, the analysis of the three dyads between China, Japan and South Korea shows that explanations based on conceptions of material power are misleading because, contrary to what these definitions of power suggest, it is far from clear who gets whom to act in ways it would otherwise not. Second, by pointing to the occurrence of very similar conflicts in all three dyads, the study not only refutes conventional arguments about the determining effects of material power shifts and regime types on international relations, it also raises the question why conservative observers in particular, think along the lines of US-Northeast Asia bilateral relations and thereby miss significant parts of the picture.²

Starting from the most basic driver of antagonism, the next section shows how clashing narratives of national identity intersect in ways which contradict conventional explanations.

Contentions over Historical Recognition

The decisive influence of nationalisms on relations between China, Japan and South Korea as taught at schools, depicted in museums, reaffirmed by opinion leaders and reinforced by the media can hardly be underestimated and is well documented. Rather than exploring the resurgence of nationalisms, my purpose here is to show how clashing narratives of national identity directed at a 'significant other,' that is of a particularly bilateral nature, in a multilateral constellation at times reinforce and at times mitigate one another.

Despite Imperial Japan waging war in Southeast Asia, and against Australia and the United States, there is a tendency toward the precipitation of the Cold War division along the former US perimeter of defence against the Communist Threat, the so-called Acheson line, which separates Japan from East Asia and makes the 38th parallel on the Korean Peninsula, the East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait the frontline of containment of potentially anti-Western states (Hara 2006). However, apart from on-going processes of globalisation which greatly transform the role of the state, there is at least one other significant obstacle to a new division of Northeast Asia. South Korea remains, despite great efforts by the United States and what are in international relations theory commonly seen as very favourable circumstances, antagonistic towards Japan. The reason is the very same that drives antagonism between China and Japan: the history

problem. In addition, historical narratives are also limiting trust in the China-South Korea relationship.

The major obstacles to normalizing China-Japan relations beyond formal diplomatic ties have been recurrent controversies about the official sanctioning of history textbooks by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, visits of incumbent prime ministers and cabinet members to the war-glorifying Yasukuni shrine and rejected redress for forced labour during wartime coupled with revisionist statements by political elites denying wartime atrocities such as the Nanjing massacre (Dudden 2008; Kim and Schwartz 2010).³

In light of the colonization of Korea from 1910 to 1945, historical recognition is no lesser a problem in relations between Japan and South Korea. In addition to visits of the Yasukuni Shrine and revisionist history textbooks, the most contentious issues between Tokyo and Seoul are the legal nature of the 1910 Annexation Treaty of Korea and the recognition of systematic enslavement in military brothels of women and girls, euphemistically termed comfort women (Park 2008). The redress movement of former sex slaves gradually overcame long-standing social and political marginalization in Korea. Despite his initial determination to improve ties with Tokyo, these developments prompted President Lee Myung-bak to raise the issue at the highest political level in a summit in December 2011 (Japan Times 2012a). After the Japanese side continued to insist that the entire question had been settled in the diplomatic normalization process, and incumbent prime ministers and political heavyweights repeatedly denied the existence and validity of (historical) evidence (Abe 2007; Ito 2011), relations between Tokyo and Seoul entered a free-fall and culminated in President Lee's unprecedented visit to the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islets in August 2012. Even more provocative in Japanese eyes was President Lee's demand that Emperor Akihito apologize for wartime atrocities. This prompted the Japanese prime minister to demand President Lee apologize for his demand of an apology (JoongAng Daily 2012a).

History emerged as a political problem between China and South Korea in the form of a controversy surrounding the nature and relationship of the ancient kingdom of Gaogouli/Koguryo with the Chinese empire. Chinese researchers engaged in a government-sponsored research project (*Dongbei Gongcheng*) in 2003 claimed that Koguryo had been a Chinese vassal state and that, therefore, ancient Koguryo tombs should be registered as Chinese rather than North Korean UNESCO world heritage sites. This assertion caused strong protest from South and North Korea. The issue went to the very heart of Korean national identity and cast a lasting shadow on the relations between contemporary South Korea and China (Chen 2012; Chung 2008). The wrestling over the status of Koguryo is related with the lingering question over border demarcation between the Chinese Yanbian/Yeonbyeon region and Korea. Although Seoul and Pyongyang acknowledge that the area in question also named Gando/Jiandao is now part of China, the view that it was transferred to Chinese control by a treaty between the Japanese colonial administration and China in 1909, makes it an object of contention (Ahn 2006). This is more so because it touches upon the sovereignty over Mt. Changbai/Paektu, a dormant volcano on the North Korean-Chinese border, which is of great symbolic significance; the North Korean regime even created the legend that it was in a military camp on the slopes of this very mountain where the late Dear Leader Kim Jong-Il was born. Thus, despite that the China-Korea history dispute does not

prominently figure in the international media and international relations scholarship, it is far from dormant or negligible (Chosun Ilbo 2012b).

Disputed territory, rocks and islets are crystallization points for narratives of national identity that keep antagonistic views alive and help mistrust become institutionalized. Maritime disputes therefore deserve a treatment separate from history problems.

Maritime Disputes

Conflicts over territorial demarcation are the manifestation of struggles of defining the boundaries of political communities. Therefore, the constellation of border disputes is largely congruent and intertwined with history disputes.

Eager to normalize relations with Japan, including an anti-hegemony clause directed against the Soviet Union, Chinese supreme leader Deng Xiaoping in 1978 suggested shelving the question of sovereignty over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. However, future generations did not turn out to be wiser as Deng had envisioned. By August 2012 the dispute, in the words of Brasor (2012) ‘fell hard from the shelf’ – and the consensus to maintain the status quo broke (Zhong 2012).⁴ A look beyond crisis diplomacy shows that in each subsequent controversy since 1990, the Chinese leaderships’ delicate balancing act of managing the contradiction between shoring up domestic legitimation while maintaining a favourable international environment has become more precarious (Strecker and Downs 1998). The Japanese public has long been unaware of maritime territorial disputes. However, amplified in a climate of fear of national decline and public frustration with politicians unable to work together for the revitalization of the country in the wake of the March 2011 disaster, territorial disputes made it onto the December 2012 election manifestos of all major parties for the first time (Asahi Shimbun 2012b). The strong perception in Japan that the weakness of political leadership and the prolonged economic crisis invited assertive claims by its neighbours may not be entirely unfounded. It is, however, far from clear that Beijing prevailed – and that the blame for tensions lies exclusively with one side (Hagström 2012).

Even though South Korean presidents since at least 1998 have all vowed to improve relations with Japan, ties remain tenuous. Epitome is the sovereignty dispute over the barren rocks called Dokdo in Korea and Takeshima in Japan. On the background of a generally bad climate due to Prime Minister Koizumi’s Yasukuni Shrine visits, tensions had by 2005 reached new heights. In part due to dissatisfaction with the way in which the central government in Tokyo handled fishery issues, the Shimane prefectural government in March 2005 asserted its claim to the features by proclaiming February 22 as Takeshima Day (Japan Times 2007). In April 2006 what Midford (2011: 78) termed a ‘near-miss at armed conflict’ demonstrated the seriousness of the problem. In response to Tokyo preparing two coast guard vessels survey the area around the islets, accompanied by stern warning from then foreign minister Ban Ki-moon and bi-partisan political support, President Roh sent 20 coast guard vessels and a reconnaissance plane to the area (Xinhua 2006). Later revealed details confirm that the Korean side was not mere sabre-rattling and would have used force to defend its position (Park 2011).

The perceived threat of Japan occupying the islands has not only prompted Seoul to conduct regular military exercises in defending the features it has also served as a major

reason for boosting defence acquisitions (Kim S.-J. 2012). Tellingly, the first of the four Korean helicopter carriers/amphibious assault ships commissioned in 2007 was named Dokdo. The South Korean foreign minister explained the problem very bluntly in an interview when he stated '[W]e are victims of Japanese colonial rule' and '[W]hen the Japanese government claims Dokdo is their territory, Korean people (take) it as another attempt to invade our country' (Daniszewski and Pennington 2012). The sovereignty issue went hand in hand with what has become a naming war that extended to the designations of undersea features and cyberspace with all three governments lobbying multinational corporations to refer to their preferred names on online map applications. Given these efforts to promote Korean designations, a Japanese foreign ministry official remarked that it seems as South Korean policymakers wanted to erase Japan from all maps.⁵

Disputes between China and South Korea also exist in the maritime sphere. This mainly concerns the use of the Dongdao and Ieodo/Socotra/Suyanjiào features as basepoints for the designation of consequently overlapping exclusive economic zones (EEZ) (Van Dyke 2003). In order to strengthen its claim to the submerged Ieodo rock, Seoul has constructed a large steel structure including a research station with helipad above it. Not surprisingly, the South Korean government is highly sensitive toward foreign, especially Chinese vessels approaching the area (KBS World 2012). When the head of the Chinese State Ocean Administration, mainly in response to the confrontation with Japan in the East China Sea, announced the enhancement of maritime patrols and enforcement of domestic law, this triggered a strong South Korean reaction. Subsequently, Chinese officials had to issue reassurances and backtracked from the plan to send drones to Ieodo (Chosun Ilbo 2012c).

Natural resources, especially unspecified and often very high estimates of oil and natural gas deposits are regularly cited as reason for assertive stances on territorial and EEZ delimitation. Due to fast economic growth that fuels China's thirst for oil and gas, it is seen in a critical position. However, there is solid evidence which suggests that mercantilist anxieties and their connection with maritime disputes are essentially driven by symbolic politics rather than objective economic interests (Kim 2011; O'Shea 2011; Wirth 2012). Fisheries are a partial exception and although rarely taken into account, particularly relevant because of how they are linked to maritime disputes and intergovernmental cooperation.

Although the 2010 controversy between Beijing and Tokyo over the arrest and attempt at trial of the Chinese fishing boat captain who rammed two Japan Coast Guard vessels was related to the disputed sovereignty over Diaoyu/Senkaku, the incident must be understood in the context of shifts, not in material power structures but fishery economics combined with the lack of regulations in the area (Manicom 2009). In stark contrast, violations in areas covered by fishery arrangements have hardly affected bilateral relations (JCG 2012; SCMP 2011). What is equally surprising from the perspective of material power is that the by far most contentious fishery relations of the China-South Korea dyad got scant attention from international media and academia (Kim S.-K. 2012). Even though they resulted in deaths, arrests and convictions of Chinese fishermen, they have not escalated politically. The selective treatment in political, media, and academic discourses of certain issues such as assertive Chinese

actions in the East China Sea while neglecting their relational quality and comparison with other dyads demonstrate the exercise of productive power.

Regardless of material power status and regime type, each state applies and interprets principles of international law so as to maximize control over maritime territory. China uses natural prolongation and straight baselines in the East China Sea, and excessive interpretation of the legal term 'island' in the South China Sea (Austin 1998). Japan bases its claims on the equidistant principle in the ECS and natural prolongation in the Western Pacific. Tokyo also uses an extensive interpretation of 'island' in the ECS and the Western Pacific in the case of Okinotorishima (Yoshikawa 2007), so does Seoul with respect to Ieodo. South Korea applies the equidistant principle in the Yellow Sea (West Sea) and the natural prolongation in the Sea of Japan (East Sea). China applies the equidistant principle in the Yellow Sea and natural prolongation in the East China Sea (Zou 2001). The submission of a claim for continental shelf delimitation in the East China Sea, which Seoul lodged with the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) in December 2012 is actually more expansive than the Chinese claim vis-à-vis Japan in the same area (Hankyoreh 2013). Additionally, each of the three governments displays assertive stances and employs uncompromising negotiation tactics where it sees itself in an advantageous position. Similar to the Soviet stance denying the existence of a territorial dispute over the Southern Kurile/Northern Territories with Japan, Tokyo on the grounds that there is no dispute refuses to enter any negotiations over the Diaoyu/Senkaku features with Beijing (MOFA 2013b). The very position Tokyo takes toward Beijing, it needs to confront as the weaker party when approaching Seoul on the status of Dokdo/Takeshima. South Korea consistently denies any dispute and refuses to enter negotiations or referral of the case to the International Court of Justice.

A perspective that looks at these conflicts beyond the tunnel view of great power politics reveals that solutions lie in de-emphasizing the bilateral dimension and focusing on the trilateral setting. A further example for this is China's assertive declaration of an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea in November 2013. The move against the previously enlarged Japanese ADIZ prompted South Korea to expand its ADIZ southward and thus created overlaps which reinforce the trilateral constellation (Ha and Seong 2013).

According to (neo-)realist theories, it is not the 'low politics' of education and fishery that determine how governments think and act, but the 'high politics' of military security. Hence, geopolitics and defence policies are the hard cases against which my argument has to be assessed.

Geopolitical Calculations

Geopolitical thinking means that amid power shift from the West to the East, Washington is preoccupied with maintaining its primacy in East Asia, while Beijing is anxious to (re-)gain its place and space in the international system. What has been called 'pivoting' or 'rebalancing' of the US toward Asia includes enhanced bilateral relationships in political and especially military dimensions (Kato 2013). This includes increased troop presence and doctrinal changes such as the revival of the Reagan-era

Air Land Battle doctrine that had heightened tensions between the US and the Soviet Union in the 1980s (Carreno *et al.* 2010).

A look at recent developments in Sino-Japanese relations suggests the possible re-emergence of a 'New Cold War'-like ideological divide. Conservatives in Japan have been promoting an 'arc of freedom and prosperity' (Aso 2006). This geopolitical idea has re-emerged in Prime Minister Abe's proposal of a 'democratic security diamond' (Abe 2012). Such views are mirrored on the Chinese side where anxieties about shipping routes through the Indian and Pacific Oceans have been deepening. As a result, the development of naval forces that can keep Japanese and US fleets off the East and South China Seas have become imperatives manifest in the conception of three roughly parallel 'island chains' that are thought to strategically part the Western Pacific North to South (Li 2009). However, even in this most conflict prone dimension of Northeast Asian politics, it is not two monolithic blocs pitted against one another.

While the China-Japan relationship has become increasingly antagonistic, Tokyo's relations with Seoul, despite the common enemy of North Korea are also hampered by geopolitical concerns. Japanese strategists, if considering it at all, struggle to come to terms with the possibility of unified Korea. Whether in the scenario with increased Chinese influence or a continuation of the South Korean political system extended to the North, a unified Korea is seen as latent geopolitical problem (Yamaji 2004). Ideas reminiscent of the metaphor of Korea being a 'dagger pointing at the heart of Japan' remain a latent part of the strategic calculus. Consequently, the maintenance of strong US-Korea and US-Japan alliances - not reconciliation - is seen as the only way to guarantee Japan's security (Onozuka 2006).

As the recent difficulties to sign basic defence agreements demonstrate, cooperation between South Korea and Japan is regularly trumped by the history problem and therefore barely advanced beyond standard confidence-building measures (Kim 2011). Moreover, in 2002, Japan's policy toward North Korea got hijacked by the fate of an official number of 13 Japanese individuals abducted by the regime in Pyongyang. Tokyo's preoccupation with this issue of 'low politics' sharply contrasts with Seoul's priorities in dealing with Pyongyang (Samuels 2010).

Geopolitical thought suggests interests between China and South Korea to be conflicting. Even though the end of bipolarity enabled diplomatic normalization and made Chinese leaders gradually relax their 'lips and teeth-tight' relations with Pyongyang, the North Korea factor weighs heavily on bilateral relations (Lee 2010). However, the China-North Korea alliance is now interpreted as operative in the event of an unprovoked attack on North Korea only (Kim 2005). Seoul's 'sunshine policy' promoted between 1998 and 2008 further reduced the influence of the North Korea factor in China-South Korea relations (Snyder 2009). Unlike South Korea, China's primary objective toward the Korean peninsula is stability not unification (Kim 2005). Yet, leaders in Beijing have indicated that they do not generally oppose a unified Korea (Al Jazeera 2010). Moreover, the ambivalence toward unification is something which Chinese decision-makers have in common with their Japanese and US counterparts. Mirroring Japanese anxieties, Chinese strategists are concerned that a unified Korea could maintain close relationship with the United States (Shi 2009). They, too, have long employed the metaphor of Korea being a 'dagger pointing at the neck of the Chinese dragon' (Chung 2008: 14). The diplomatic wrangling and military posturing

stirred by the North-South confrontation over the 2010 sinking of the South Korean naval vessel Cheonan and the shelling of the Yeonpyeong Island in the Yellow/West Sea by North Korea illustrates these conflicting strategic interests (China Daily 2010).

However, if China and South Korea share common aversions rather than common interests (Kim 2005), one wonders whether relations between China and North Korea are any better. North Korean leaders' anxiety about the rapidly deepening dependence on China, Chinese anxiety over the consequences of a North Korean humanitarian crisis and opposition toward its nuclear weapons program suggest that Beijing and the North share even less common aversions than Beijing and the South. The Chinese reaction to the third North Korean testing of a nuclear device in February 2013 and the subsequent support of enhanced UN sanctions was the most recent and clearest sign (Perlez 2013). This counterintuitive situation has led observers to depict China as bandwagoning with North Korea (Scobell 2012).

In summary, a regional perspective must come to the finding that even parochial national interests derived from material power and military threat perceptions as they are expressed in geopolitical thought, while not conducive to political integration, are limited in their divisive effects because none of the three countries can escape from its entanglement in the Northeast Asian security complex. This finding leaves room for alternative futures.

Trilateral Power Relations and Regional Stability

The salience of very similar disputes over wartime history and territorial delimitation in all dyads between China, Japan and South Korea leads to several conclusions about Northeast Asian international relations and their theorizing.

First, parsimonious explanations based on either regime type or material power status are inadequate. This is not to claim that differentials in material power are irrelevant. In contrast to unidirectional, material conceptions of power, however, this has not necessarily made weaker states give in to demands by stronger states. To the contrary, due to their anxieties weaker actors have often displayed assertive behaviour and successfully prevailed while stronger, more confident states tended to be more inclined to de-escalate conflicts. The April 2006 confrontation over Dokdo/Takeshima between Japan and South Korea is a good example.

Second, amity-enmity patterns divide the regional security complex along different lines depending on the area concerned. Rising China is seen as a great threat in Japan but as relatively minor concern in South Korea. Despite its decline, Japan is perceived as a threat in South Korea and even in China. When it comes to territorial disputes it is not only Japan being pitted against China. For South Korea, Japanese claims are extremely worrisome while Chinese claims remain a concern. Geopolitics, the area, which is due to the inherent uncertainty that comes with the aspiration to forecast long-term developments most dividing, reveals that strategic calculations diverge from conventional views.

Overall, the constellation of interlocking interests and threat perceptions in Northeast Asia points to the possibility that the three competitive and antagonistic dyadic relations combined may produce cooperative or cancel out negative effects. Such an

understanding brings agency—particularly Asian leaders’ agency—back in. The politics surrounding the project of a China-Japan-Korea free-trade agreement (FTA) is an illustrative example for how competitive initiatives in the bilateral dimension spur trilateral cooperation (Japan Times 2012b). The avoidance of traditional security issues in trilateral fora, rather than vindicating the preponderance of material power, points to the different dimensions of power at play. It shows the strength of productive power manifest in the salience of national identities and political legitimation. The more issues touch upon and question national myths – history textbooks and military affairs are prime examples - the more they become securitized and channelled into the tunnel-views of bilateralism. This is not to argue that multilateral institutions have the power to mitigate interstate rivalry. Therefore, the fact that trilateral meetings have in the face of bilateral tensions been downgraded to the sub-ministerial level in 2013 does not question the present argument. That the US ‘rebalancing’ toward the Asia-Pacific reinforces bilateral military alliances and indirectly affects trilateralism further reinforces my point.

Given the rather bleak picture one may also argue that classical realist approach provides sufficient means for the explanation of the described phenomena. The mere fact that there exist in the present case at present time tendencies toward an anarchic world of self-help as it is envisioned by realists, however, does not justify this paradigm’s claim to the universal applicability of unchanging laws (Wendt 1999). More important, from a rationalist standpoint it is hard to understand, for instance, why Japanese leaders are willing to significantly curtail sovereignty in relation to the US while displaying an uncompromising stance toward seemingly minor issues concerning features at sea with China *and* South Korea. Not the least, the conflation and even convergence of realist (rational interest) with liberal (normative value) arguments such as in the case of the power shift and arc of freedom and prosperity propositions are irreconcilable with the respective theoretical assumptions.

Although this study applied a conventional, state-centric perspective on bilateral relations, the striking similarities of contentious issues in all three dyads and the unequal attention that is given to them in the international relations realm demonstrates how productive power works. The strong tendency of looking for differences that confirm existing enmity patterns while turning blind eyes on commonalities – cooperative *or* *conflictual* – reproduces bilateralism across the Asia-Pacific. The securitization of the maritime sphere spurred by anxieties over the freedom of navigation in the sea lanes of communication (SLOC) is a case on point. China, Japan and South Korea, all heavily dependent on Middle Eastern oil, sit in the same boat. Nevertheless, governments and academics, rather than recognize how their countries’ interests converge, super-size potential rivalries.

This reading of political dynamics in Northeast Asia is in line with explanations that see international politics mainly driven by domestic struggles for political legitimacy (Rozman and Lee 2006). The making and active use of national myths by conservative elites in China, Japan and South Korea often align well with views on Asia-Pacific security in the United States. The US restraining of allies in military crisis management and nationalist rhetoric is undisputable. Such actions which influence interaction change (Gilpin 1983), however, should not distract from more fundamental influence that often produces basic tensions in the first place. It is far more convenient for Northeast Asian

elites to interact with Washington than with their neighbours. Rather than to question official narratives that legitimize their political systems, foci on bilateral interaction with the US reaffirm long-held beliefs. This holds true regardless of whether relations are cooperative, competitive or even conflicting as in the case of North Korea. Northeast Asian preferences for bilateralism are welcome in Washington as this allows for the continuation of informal and formal alliance relationships and assuages anxieties of being excluded from East Asia.

Despite repeated commitment to alliances and the general view on the desirability, with exceptions, of US presence, conservative elites both in Northeast Asia and in Washington tend to become nervous when substantial matters of alliance relationships are discussed among the broader public. President Kim's sunshine policy of engaging the North met with great suspicion among conservatives both in Seoul and Washington (Chung 2008). When South Korean President Roh in 2005 and Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama in 2009 suggested recalibrating their respective alliance relationships with Washington, anxiety engulfed conservative policy and academic circles on both sides of the Pacific (Choe 2005; Kang 2006; Roos 2009). These fears have proven unfounded.

The argument put forward here is no claim to comprehensive explanation nor do I suggest that China, Japan and South Korea are the same. Differences in capacities for adaptation are crucial and vary according to the natures of political systems. It is in this regard that the distribution of power within states, for instance in the form of the centralization of political and economic institutions should be further explored. What the present study shows is that for states, politicians, government officials and academics to be powerful means to be able to maintain long-held beliefs in spite of rapidly changing environments. Deutsch (1966: 111) was therefore right in stating that power is 'the ability to afford not to learn'. His warning that power when carried to extremes 'becomes blind, and the person or organization becomes insensitive to the present, and is driven, like a bullet or torpedo, wholly by its past,' should remind us that arguing for stability, due to powerful actors' ability to talk instead of listening (Deutsch 1966: 111), may well be the very cause of instability. This holds true for the national as well as the international level. Thus, the meaning of power changes depending on the time horizon applied. In the short-term, compulsory and institutional, that is, material power may secure an actors' identity by forestalling views that contradict established self-conceptions. The longer the time horizon, however, the more there is a need to adopt reflexive concepts of power because a powerful actor's inherent blindness toward profound changes in its environment will eventually lead to decline. Ironically, it is fear rooted in the uncertain quest to project developments into the distant future such as apparent in the securitizing effect of geopolitical thought that leads to short-sighted fixation on material power and forecloses potentially more sustainable alternate courses of action. To look at Northeast Asia as a regional security complex and to define the concept of power appropriate for the specific issue in question therefore improves the quality of analyses by pointing to the issue of change and adaptation.

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¹ For examples see Snyder (2009), p. 165.

² An example is Armitage and Nye's (2012) call on Japan to address the history problem instrumental to improve security cooperation with South Korea disregarding the fact that it is the very issues that haunt Japan's relations with China.

³ Revisionist history textbooks remain also contested *within* Japan. While suppressed in China, their use to bolster authoritarian state institutions makes them controversial within South Korea too. Chinese and Korean historiography paint Japan in an overly negative and the own regimes in overly positive lights.

⁴ Despite official denials earlier statements confirm the existence of a consensus (Ishida 2013).

⁵ Personal conversation, Tokyo, July 2012.