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Realism, liberalism and regional order in East Asia: toward a hybrid approach

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ABSTRACT

East Asia offers a fertile ground for applying dominant theoretical perspectives in International Relations and understanding their relevance and limitations. As this region has seen much conflict and cooperation historically and is re-emerging as a key theater of great power competition in the 21st century even when states maintain high levels of economic interactions, our understanding of the regional order will be enhanced by the theoretical tools available in the larger mainstream IR perspectives. The existence of a peculiar regional order of no war, yet a number of simmering disputes (along with high levels of economic interdependence) can be characterized as *cold peace* which deserves an explanation. The paper applies two variants of realism—balance of power and hegemonic stability – and the key arguments in liberalism to analyze the *cold peace* in Northeast Asia and *normal peace* in Southeast Asia from a historical perspective. It finds both grand theoretical approaches have partial applications for understanding the East Asian order. A hybrid approach is more valuable to better explain regional order during diverse time periods and different sub-regions of East Asia. Although the presence of both hegemony and balance of power can prevent major wars for a period, they do not help resolve the pre-existing disputes. Deepened economic interdependence mitigates some spiraling tendencies as states fearful of losing too much economically do not escalate crises beyond a point.

KEYWORDS Regional order; realism; liberalism; East Asia; peaceful change

Introduction¹

Regional order has emerged as an important issue area in International Relations (IR) for both scholars and practitioners in the post-Cold War era. It was the end of the US-Soviet bipolar competition in 1991 that gave the regions renewed attention in the discipline.¹ During the past three decades, the key regions of the world underwent many changes, some conflictual

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and others cooperative or even transformative. What causes regional order transformation is a topic of contention among International Relations scholars. As the focus of this special issue on peaceful change, it is particularly interesting to see what these perspectives say about the prospects of peaceful change in regional orders. Dominant perspectives in IR, Realism (classical, neo-classical, structural), Liberalism (variants including liberal institutionalism, commercial liberalism and democratic Peace); constructivism, English School and various critical perspectives, including post-colonial and post-structural theories, all view alterations in the regional space with specific variables as movers and conditioners. Due to space limitations, in this paper, I will not be engaging these theoretical perspectives. Some give prominence to structural variables while others recognize the importance of agents, be it states, national leaders or national identities. Yet, the atomized IR theoretical world often has trouble grasping the full extent of change as each perspective can explain some variants of change and their causes while leaving much to be explored. The puzzle is why some regions emerge into *cold peace* or *warm peace* while others are mired in *cold war* or even periodic *hot wars*, the categories of regional order as developed by Benjamin Miller.² Within larger regions with sub-regions we can also notice some dyadic relations characterized by the *cold war*, *cold peace* and *normal peace* spectrum. If we include Southeast Asia as part of larger East Asia, we can notice that a form of *normal peace* has emerged there at the inter-state level, especially after the joining of Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar and Laos as ASEAN members in the 1990s.

In this paper, I address the conceptual problems inherent in two dominant IR perspectives, realism and liberalism in explaining regional orders and order transitions, especially of the peaceful variety. The paper examines the regional order transition ideas inherent in them, with the aid of the dynamics in the East Asia region which comprises the sub-regions of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. I contend that the regional order in Northeast Asia today is best conceptualized as a hybrid order characterized by *cold peace* in much of the region except the Korean peninsula and the Taiwan-China area where it is more like a *cold war* (see Singh in this issue). In Southeast Asia we can picture a *normal peace* but not yet a *warm* or *deep peace* (see Caballero-Anthony and Emmers in this issue). Peaceful transformation is viewed as a continuum from a minimalist normal peace to a maximalist deep peace, i.e., from normal changes to foreign policies to institutionalized order where justice and peace prevails for all (Paul, 2020, p. 4). The essay concludes by arguing the need for developing hybrid perspectives so as to capture regional transformations more accurately. A lingering question is whether great powers that are heavily involved in a given region should be part of the region or should be considered as extra-regional powers. I

contend that regional order must include the most heavily involved great powers as they may have a large amount of influence in determining peace or conflict in the region under study, even if they are not geographically members of the region. In that sense geographical 'region' and 'regional order' are two distinguishable yet inter-related analytical categories.³

I use East Asia as a primary example to illustrate my arguments as this is a region that has witnessed war, conflict, cooperation, hegemony and change to such an extent that each perspective has something tangible to offer while leaving many puzzles unanswered. The chief arenas of conflict are: China-Taiwan, China-Japan, North-South Korea, and China-Southeast Asian states on the South China Sea islands. The ASEAN states have achieved a greater level of inter-state peace, but intra-state peace is periodically upset, the most recent example being the 2021 coup in Myanmar and the democratic slide in ASEAN member states like the Philippines and Thailand. The Korean peninsula is the most militarized of these conflicts while Taiwan-China relations also pose potential for escalation to a major hot war, despite increased economic and social relations between Beijing and Taipei since the 1990s as well as the U.S. presence. More importantly, with the rise of China as a global power, this region has also the greatest potential to re-emerge as the theater of great power conflict involving the relatively declining U.S. and rising China, dragging regional states along with it. As regional orders can take different forms and manifestations in the conflict to peace spectrum, it is imperative to address the specific focus of a given IR perspective before addressing their prospects and problems as analytical approaches. These forms can be characterized as *stability-instability*, *warm/stable peace*, *normal peace*, *cold peace*, *cold war* and *hot war* (Miller, 2007, p. 2). Do these manifestations occur in a linear fashion or are they punctuated by variations due to internal and external forces often beyond the control of regional states? Even those who believe in linear progression of regional orders, there are periods when progress achieved can be reversed or upset due to the arrival of particular constellations of domestic and international forces. More significantly, how do we recognize that peaceful change is happening in regional orders? And how do we know these changes are for the long term?

The paper first discusses different types of regional orders in terms of the level of peace and conflict prevalent in a given region. In that process the defining characteristics of peaceful change are discussed briefly. This is followed by a major section on two mainstream IR paradigms and their applicability to East Asian regional order. The two key theoretical approaches within Realism—balance of power and hegemonic stability—are presented only to show their partial applicability. Liberal perspectives, in particular the three Kantian approaches—democratic peace, economic

interdependence and institutional peace—are discussed to show the limited role each plays singularly in the region. A hybrid or eclectic approach is proposed as it captures the most in examining the different levels of regional orders in different sub regions and different time periods of the wider East Asian region's contemporary evolution. It is argued this is also a fruitful way to assess levels of regional peace as opposed to pigeonholing and forcing analytical categories to fit one IR perspective or other. In that sense, this article adds to the other papers in this special issue that focus on the role of institutions as vehicles of transformational change in East Asia, in particular Kai He, Mely Caballero-Anthony and Ralf Emmers). It, however, reinforces the introductory article by Bhubhindar Singh, which also seeks a hybrid approach to understanding minimal peaceful change in the East Asian regional context.

Types of regional security orders

As Benjamin Miller explains, *cold peace* in the regional context is a condition when 'conflict is reduced but not resolved, and although the danger of war declines, it's very possibility shapes the strategic landscape and the parties take the chance of war erupting into account in their behavior' (Miller, 2007, p. 12). It is a 'situation characterized by formal agreements among the parties and the maintenance of diplomatic relations among them. The underlying issues of the regional conflict are in the process moderated and reduced, but are far from being resolved. The danger of the use of force is thus unlikely in the near future, but it still looms in the background, and is possible in the longer run if changes in the international or regional environment occur' (Miller, 2007, p. 45).

Warm peace is a 'situation in which the parties share expectations that no resort to armed violence is possible in the foreseeable future under any circumstances, including government change in any of the states or a change in the international setting. There is no planning by the regional states for the use of force against each other' (Miller, 2007, pp. 46-47). *Warm peace* is also characterized by high levels of transnational relations that 'take place in a multiplicity of areas and include open borders, a high degree of economic interdependence, a dense network of regional institutions, intense people to people interactions and tourism, and widespread cultural exchange' (Miller, 2007, p. 48). A *cold war* condition is 'characterized by recurrent military crisis and a considerable likelihood of escalation to war, either in a premeditated way or inadvertently. The parties may succeed in managing the crises, avoiding escalation to wars while protecting their vital interests, but they do not attempt seriously to resolve the fundamental issue in dispute between them' (Miller, 2007, p. 45). The US-Soviet conflict

during the Cold War era is the prime example of such a phenomenon globally, but variants of this condition can occur in regions even without the high intensity characteristic of the latter case. *Hot war* is self-explanatory i.e., parties engage in actual organized physical violence to advance their goals

When do regions transform from one regional order, described above, to another? Ideas from realism – both balance of power and hegemonic versions– can offer insights into the conflict behavior and its restraint by regional states to an extent. However, the liberal factors, economic interdependence and institutional mechanisms, can help to mitigate the power and identity conflicts. The result is that the regional conflicts may not escalate to intense crisis or wars, but the underlying causes of conflict persist. The condition of *cold peace* in much of Northeast Asia, under specific emerging circumstances could produce a *cold war* or *hot war* of different magnitudes. The emergence of a regional order of *warm peace* or *deep peace* would be desirable, but none of the two sub-regions of East Asia yet contain conditions conducive to it. In order for such a peaceful transformation, societal level accommodation is necessary akin to Western Europe and the full liberal tripod (democratic peace, economic interdependence, and effective international institutions) operating on a sustained basis. *Warm peace* or *deep peace* is therefore, unlikely to occur in East Asia and the ongoing power transition involving China and the territorial disputes, largely involving Beijing, could generate crises without major escalations for some time to come.

Defining peaceful change

‘Peaceful change’ is viewed here as a continuum along a minimalist and maximalist spectrum from *cold peace* to *regular peace* to *warm peace*. In the recently published *Oxford Handbook of Peaceful Change in International Relations*, I defined minimalist conceptions as pertaining to ‘change in international relations and foreign policies of states, including territorial or sovereignty agreements that take place without violence or coercive use of force.’ This may produce a *cold peace* or *normal peace* outcome. On the other spectrum, I proposed a maximalist definition as: ‘transformational change that takes place non-violently at the global, regional, interstate, and societal levels due to various material, normative and institutional factors, leading to deep peace among states, higher levels of prosperity and justice for all irrespective of nationality, race or gender’ (Paul, 2020, p. 4). This is indeed the *warm peace* outcome discussed above. In addition, an in-between mini-max definition can be pictured similar to what Karl Deutsch and collaborators have proposed: ‘the resolution of social problems

mutually by institutionalized procedures without resort to largescale physical force' (Deutsch et al., 1957, p. 5). This is similar to *regular peace*, a category in between *cold peace* and *warm peace*. Peaceful *regional transformation* is a cognate concept that needs a definition. In another previous work, I defined 'regional order transformation' at a minimum as a condition in which states in a region coexist, accepting the rights and responsibilities of each other, and resort to institutional and diplomatic mechanisms for dispute resolution, thereby avoiding war to settle their differences (Paul, 2012, pp. 5-6). Peaceful territorial change is a crucial dimension of regional change that encompasses interstate changes but this is a necessary and not sufficient condition for deep transformation (Kacowicz, 1994). As I picture, a maximalist understanding of positive peaceful change in a region would imply 'the existence of a highly pluralistic security community in which war is not even thought of as an option and change within this order is the result of institution-based dialogue and compromises among states and non-state actors' (Paul, 2020, p. 6). This will be akin to the *warm peace* or *deep peace* as discussed earlier.

Regional order and two mainstream IR perspectives

When and how regions become peaceful or conflictual is a puzzle that has much relevance to our understanding of peace and war in the international system.⁴ More importantly, when do we obtain *cold peace*, *warm peace* or *cold war* and *hot war* in a given region? Let us take realism and its two variants— balance of power and hegemonic stability – that have the most to explain regional orders, whether it is war, cooperation or stability.⁵ Both offer contradictory reasons for order or stability (most close to *cold peace*) at global and regional levels as *perpetual peace* or *warm peace* is not achievable. Policy prescriptions for a stable regional order tend to support both realist positions depending on specific foreign policy orientations of the country concerned.

Realist mechanism I: Balance of power

All Realisms, especially classical and structural, take a proper balance of power among contending states or alliances among them as the key mechanism to obtain peace or more accurately, stability at the global and regional levels. A region is stable if the power positions of the key states in the region and the most-involved major powers are balanced so that no one becomes preponderant and smaller states are secure in terms of their independence and sovereignty from predation by larger powers. Balance of power is achieved either through internal balancing by the balancer, with

the acquisition of adequate capabilities for defense and deterrence, or external balancing, relying on military alliances of like-minded states. When great imbalances occur in power distribution among regional states, especially the most significant regional states, we can expect conflict or even war. Hegemony of a powerful state is the worst outcome as in order for the weaker states to remain as independent entities, power needs to be met by countervailing power to change the incentive structure of the stronger side.⁶ This is because regardless of the political system, the powerful will have the temptation to dominate and in extreme cases, eliminate the weaker actors if and when an opportunity arises.

It is still an unanswered question if regional balancing occurs independently of global balancing among great powers. Structural realists such as Waltz do not consider regional order as independent from systemic level balance of power, involving great powers. To them, at the end of the day, the fate of regions is determined by the distribution of power or polarity that exists at the international system level among the most powerful great power states. There is a tendency among structural realists to contend that all we need to study is the behavior of big powers as smaller powers have to act according to the dictates of the larger ones. From their perspectives, relations among big powers disproportionality affect regional orders. For instance, stability is most likely to occur if there is a bipolar order with two superpowers at the helm of affairs at the international level and they will bring order to the regions as well. Stability could be equivalent to *cold war* or *cold peace* as a no war outcome is most feasible in an anarchic international system where power competition is endemic. To some, balance of power is a law of international politics and that it recurs automatically as weaker states flock together to prevent conquest or domination by a powerful state (Waltz, 1979). There is indeed debate as to whether states balance against power or against threat (Walt, 1987). There is also debate as to whether states balance using less coercive mechanisms as discussed by soft balancing theorists (Paul, 2018).

Realist mechanism II: Hegemonic stability

A strand of realist scholarship considers the opposite of balance of power, hegemony, as the chief predictor of peace or stability (akin to *cold peace*) at both global and regional levels. The dominant scholar here is Robert Gilpin who believes that a hegemonic power with adequate military and economic preponderance is essential for peace to emerge globally and regionally. If and when the hegemonic power declines new contenders will arise who may be tempted to resort to war to obtain their dominance. This occurs as there is no strong power to deter and defend against the

ambitious newcomer (Gilpin, 1981). The theory originates from international political economy, especially from Kindleberger who explained stable, liberal international economic orders are the result of the dominance of a liberal state with both market power and geopolitical dominance. The presence of such a powerful benevolent state is essential to achieve free trade and collective economic goods such as free trade, and in distress times, a state that can rescue others from disaster (Kindleberger, 1975). The idea is that the rise and maintenance of liberal orders are not automatic and that they need a strong system leader to do so (Ikenberry, 2000; Keohane, 1984). Gilpin (1981), who brought out the security dimensions of hegemonic stability argued that states attempt to change the system if only the expected costs exceed the expected benefits. In a preponderant system, dominated by a hegemonic state, the costs of such alteration will be very high as the power gap is not easily bridged. AFK Organski's power transition theory also contends that the overwhelming preponderance of a status quo power is essential to prevent major wars. The assumption is that when a challenger nears parity or surpasses the established power marginally it may get the temptation to accelerate the process and challenge the system violently (Kugler & Lemke, 1996; Organski, 1961). To Douglas Lemke, the power transition theory's claim is that 'so long as the dominant state is preponderant it is able to defend the status quo against all dissatisfied states. The weak dissatisfied states realize that they do not have the where-withal successfully to challenge the dominant state for control of the international system, and *cold peace* [albeit not harmony or *deep peace*] is likely to prevail' (Lemke, 2002, p. 25).

In the East Asia Region, we find partial support for both perspectives during different historical eras. During the Cold War era, a form of tenuous balance of power existed between the US and USSR-led blocks and East Asia was a primary theater of such great power competition. Despite the superpower led balance of power, the region experienced cold and hot wars of different magnitudes. The difficulty though is to explain the number of destabilising wars in the region during the Cold War era – Korea, Vietnam, Vietnam-Cambodia, and China-Vietnam – using the balance of power prism. A number of empirical puzzles exist here in terms of balance of power theory's full validity. The Korean War (1950–1953) was initiated by a weaker North Korea initially, although indirect military support from its allies, China and Russia encouraged strongman Kim Il-sung to resort to war in 1950. The Chinese intervention in Korea in October 1950 offers a major challenge to balance of power theory as the weaker China engaged the stronger US-led coalition and drew the war to a status quo ante position in 1953 through the armistice agreement (Paul, 1994). Vietnam invaded Kampuchea in 1975 despite the latter receiving Chinese, US and ASEAN

support, and Vietnam only had limited assistance from the Soviet Union. A materially stronger China engaged in an aggressive war on Vietnam in 1979 which the weaker Hanoi was able to repel. In a larger sense, during the Cold War, despite the balance of power between the two superpower-led blocks, the East Asia region was not all that peaceful or stable, except among the US allies and for a period after the Southeast Asian states that formed the ASEAN grouping. It must be acknowledged that there was relative peace in Southeast Asia, especially after the formation of ASEAN in 1967 by the allies (Philippines and Thailand) and supporters (Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore) of the US. As the contribution by Mely Caballero-Anthony and Ralf Emmers in this issue contends the approaches of the Southeast Asian states to peace, 'reflected in the notion of comprehensive security and the building of national and regional resilience, is instructive in understanding peaceful transformations in the region.'

Hegemonic Stability theory would claim that the East Asia region's security and prosperity among the US allies during the Cold War was possible due to American dominance and hegemonic benevolence. US military superiority, especially in the naval arena, also prevented the Soviet Union, China and North Korea to destabilize peace beyond a point. As discussed above, the region witnessed many wars and crises despite the presence of American hegemony and East Asia was also a major arena of arms buildup among the contending powers. In the post-Cold War era, American hegemony became more apparent, but regional states also created and strengthened institutional frameworks such as ASEAN, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) without the US taking the lead or in some cases opposing the effort. Moreover, American hegemony has not prevented China from challenging the territorial order in the South China Sea by making dubious historical claims over a vast swath of international waters and building and militarizing artificial islets to strengthen those claims. China's grand strategy of challenging the US hegemony via asymmetric strategies as well as its economic mechanism of BRI are not easily accountable by the hegemonic stability theory. These asymmetric strategies and attendant capabilities can slowly chip away the overall preponderance of an established hegemonic state. For instance, cyber war is increasingly used by challengers, Russia and China, to whittle down American primacy via developing and using asymmetric strategies and weapons.

There is also a liberal bias to hegemonic stability theory as developed in the West. It is not clear why the U.S. hegemony is automatically associated with peace while a Chinese hegemony could lead to war or insecurity.⁷ In fact, US military interventions in regional theaters like the Middle East have

generated extraordinary instability and suffering for millions of people. A 2020 study by the Watson Institute at Brown University showed that the Post-9/11 US-led wars caused some 801,000 direct war casualties, a larger number of indirect casualties, 37 million war refugees, \$6.4 trillion in expenditures, and a number of ongoing challenges and violence (Watson Institute, [n.d.](#)). It is more likely that the transition from one hegemony to the other may not be peaceful. More importantly, the answer may lie in the non-liberal character of China. The order that China as a hegemon plans to create would undercut modernity's greatest achievements, freedom and democracy, even when it may be more efficient in economic development and distribution. So, the claim of hegemonic stability is that the hegemon has to be liberal and benevolent in order for smaller states to preserve their independence while simultaneously reaping the benefits of free trade has to be taken with a grain of salt. It is also a myth that the liberal hegemon will always be benevolent as the Trump era shows the malevolent side of American hegemony due to peculiar domestic politics that elected an unpredictable, whimsical, populist leader. The more plausible argument about the US losing its hegemony is that power transitions from one hegemon to another can rarely be peaceful and often the victims are weaker states. Asia-Pacific indeed faced such a hegemonic war in 1938-45 as a result of the Japanese effort to replace Anglo-American-Dutch colonial hegemony of the region. Defenders of Chinese-led order could make the same argument and claim that the historical tributary model was relatively peaceful as smaller units co-existed as long as they kowtowed to the Chinese emperor.⁸ Hence, transition to a modern-day tributary style model need not be violent. However, weaker states in an age of nationalism and Westphalian sovereignty will find that very difficult to stomach as sovereign equality is a powerful concept that even the smallest states cherish in the international society today.

Yet another challenge to hegemonic stability theory is that a region can have multiple hierarchies affecting its security relations even when a powerful state dominates the global system. External great powers need not be the only key players in shaping regional orders. To Lemke, the international system can be conceived 'as a series of parallel power hierarchies, each of which functions similarly to the others and to the overall international power hierarchy' (Lemke, [2002](#), p. 48). A regionally preponderant power can be a source of conflict for smaller states in the region, especially if it is in conflict with the dominant external hegemonic power (Lemke, [2002](#)). Russia, China and India all claim limited hierarchies in their respective immediate sub-regions of Asia-Pacific even though their dominant statuses have not produced peaceful outcomes all the time. All we have to do is to examine the conflict behavior of these three states and the attitudes of

their neighbors in their respective sub-regions to realize the positive and negative effects of regional hegemonies because some comply while others resist inroads by powerful regional states.

The two dominant realist mechanisms have difficulty in explaining different forms of regional orders other than *hot war/cold war* or stability (*cold peace*). Realists, especially structural, could defend their positions by contending that they are talking about long-term macro level processes. Realism may have limitations as to how or why leaders make their choices in a particular point in time and how those choices affect different regional orders from cold peace to cold war to hot war continuum. We cannot ignore systemic forces that tend to reassert periodically when states are forced to follow the realist logic under conditions of anarchy. However, we need additional variables to explain micro or unit level changes, especially the incidences of high levels of internal violence in some of the weak states and how that affects their external behavior. Conversely, a highly realpolitik-oriented state such as North Korea can suppress and isolate its domestic population which may bring a facade of internal stability, but not genuine peace. Realist explanations, except the neoclassical variety, are more about long-term macro-level processes while ignoring micro-level dynamics that can generate outcomes such as *normal peace* as well as *warm peace*.

Liberal mechanisms

Three core mechanisms exist for peace to occur from the liberal perspectives. They are: democracies generate peaceful order; economic interdependence among states encourages them not to engage in costly wars or conflicts; and international institutions promote peace through engagement and consultative mechanisms (Russett & Oneal, 2000). Democracies have both structural and normative incentives and constraints in escalating disputes with fellow democracies. The democratic peace among European states has been attributed to this consideration. Deep economic interdependence creates both sensitivity and vulnerability among the involved states. Regional and international institutions could act as both arenas for cooperation and dispute settlement mechanisms and over time, states can develop institutional links that could replace traditional military solutions to security problems. If all these three mechanisms develop simultaneously, a region can transform itself into a pluralistic security community, or one of *warm peace* akin to Western Europe where war is not thought of an option among the member states (Adler & Barnett, 1998). Moreover, liberal international order is underwritten by the strong hegemonic power of the United States by developing strong constitution like arrangements, in particular during post-war settlements (Ikenberry, 2000).

Many puzzles exist while explaining regional order in East Asia using the liberal mechanisms. The democratic peace that liberals talk about is nearly absent in East Asia. During the Cold War era, a majority of the states, especially China, Russia and most Southeast Asian nations, were not democratic. With the end of the Cold War, the democratic space widened, still most states are quasi or illiberal democracies. Hence the notion of democratic peace has little value for explaining the limited peaceful regional order or cold peace in East Asia. Commercial liberalism and its key ingredient, economic interdependence, has more resonance to explaining stability during certain periods. Yet, during the Cold War, interdependence was confined to a small group of states, US-Japan most prominently, and their bilateral alliance relationship can explain their economic relations as well to a great extent. However, as ASEAN states became more prominent economic players, a form of economic interdependence developed among them. Some attribute Southeast Asian states' relative peace (akin to *normal peace*) in the external realm to high levels of economic interdependence, in addition to ideational variables (Emmers & Caballero-Anthony, 2020). China's rise as a major trading state developed into asymmetrical interdependence with the regional states. The increasing economic interdependence, largely among non-liberal states, gives some credence to the interdependence-peace hypothesis. Yet, we need much more nuanced analysis of the micro-foundations of the interdependence-peace hypothesis in East Asia before making a conclusive judgment.

Liberal institutionalism has partial applicability as in the case of ASEAN, but in the larger East Asia, the institutions have been scarce, particularly in the security arena. Some notable exceptions include ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM)-Plus, that offer critical platforms for dialogue and limited and non-binding cooperation, as well as enhancing familiarity among large and smaller powers in the region. The other security feature of the region has been the growth of minilaterals addressing specific strategic issues, such as North Korea. ASEAN is given credit for creating a limited security community and the 'normal peace' among states of Southeast Asia. The economic institution, APEC has been in existence since 1989, but it played no direct role in the security arena. The region-wide free trade groupings, CPTPP and RCEP came into existence only in 2018 and 2020 respectively and it may be a while before their impact is visible. It is true that in the post-Cold War era, regional trade and investment have increased exponentially in the region, and the states have been widening their economic relations by free trade and other institutional mechanisms despite periodic frictions and security challenges. This shows that economic interdependence need not take way deep rooted security conflicts and states can live in both liberal and realist worlds at the same time.

Another issue is whether these liberal mechanisms can exist on their own merit or do they need realist structures such as a balance of power or a powerful hegemon to support the order. For instance, Michael Leifer argues that the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is depended on a stable balance of power (Leifer, 1996). The liberal order does not happen just like that as it presupposes agency, be they state elite or coalitions to emerge before liberal peace ever develops. Societal pressures are necessary to keep the liberal order as there is both a top down and a bottom up process in peace (Ripsman, 2016). What precedes is an unsettled issue similar to the chicken or egg question when it comes to interdependence-peace hypothesis. Moreover, as Kai He argues in his contribution to this special issue, institutional competition mechanism can be used by major powers such as the US and China, although the latter is not a liberal state.

Theoretical pathways: a possible Realist-Liberal hybrid approach?

The preceding discussion shows the partial applicability of theoretical perspectives in East Asia where we can notice mixed patterns ranging from *hot war*, *cold war*, *cold peace*, to *normal peace*.⁹ It should be mentioned that there is some degree of recognition in existing works on East Asian Order as hybrid. Bhubhindar Singh in this issue develops a syncretic approach combining liberal and realist approaches to show how these factors in combination make the 'minimal peace' in the region. Foot and Goh, for instance, offer a 'conjunctions analytical framework that explores what happens at the conjunctions of the regional-global and the unit-regional/global levels of analysis—the "grey areas" where social formations meet and interact' (Foot & Goh, 2019, p. 398). Some scholars belonging to the English school approaches have developed mixes of Hobbesian, Kantian and Grotian approaches to explain peace and order, while others have explored 'regional security complexes' which also are hybrid in their nature (Buzan & Weaver, 2003; Navari, 2021). We still lack proper answers to several questions and puzzles generated by the earlier discussion on the variations between *cold peace* and other forms of regional orders. One way to look at it is by positioning general regional transformation as a path-dependent continuum with multiple turning points and evolutionary possibilities as well as bumps along the way. Realist and liberal logic could carry greater weight during different historical junctures to explain the type of regional order in the war-peace continuum. Factors from each perspective could act as a constraint or an opportunity for regional states to engage in conflict or cooperation. External powers, especially great powers can shape regional orders, but they need not determine it singularly unless the region is

directly under the dominance of a powerful state for a very long period of time. In the past, empires offered these possibilities, but no empire would last beyond a certain period as conquests by outsiders which often produced extraordinary violence to the inhabitants of the regional space. In the post-World War II era, no great power hegemon has come close to such an empire in the East Asian context.

Partially due to American dominance in IR, there is a general tendency to view great powers' role in the regions as benevolent and peace producing. This is a fallacy. As Benjamin Miller and Korina Kagan contend: 'Great power involvement in a region takes the shape of competition, cooperation, dominance, and disengagement' (Miller & Kagan, 1997, p. 51). In fact, unnecessary interventions without proper exit plans have caused much misery to regions. Further, great powers exacerbate regional conflicts, by taking sides and providing arms to client states or groups. Great powers can be big spoilers of regional order if they actively support opposing countries or within contending domestic groups in key regional states. Therefore, periods when bipolar conflict occurred, a region could witness balance of power as a source of systemic stability, punctuated by periodic crisis and asymmetric challenges from and within second ranking states, generating both cold war and hot war outcomes. If a region or a sub-region is largely dominated by a hegemonic state, it could witness relative peace as long as that dominant state is able to offer collective security and prevent countervailing forces from emerging. But the challenge here is that the dominant state could take sides in both inter-state and internal conflicts, often causing discord rather than cooperation. The immediate period after the end of the Cold War was one such era, when the US assumed hegemony in Asia-Pacific. This changed as China emerged as a powerful competitor with its own vision of dominance and replacement of the American order. In 2012, Xi Jinping came to power with a plan to achieve Chinese dominance in Asia-Pacific and has chipped away some of the American power position in the region and the adjacent waters.

In East Asia, since 2019 or so, there have been a soft balancing coalition and nascent hard balancing starting to develop with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD, also referred to as the Quad) comprising US, Japan, India and Australia attempting to balance Chinese power and threatening behavior. However, whether a powerful balance of power coalition against China emerges is yet to be seen. Contra Waltz, as East Asia emerges into a bipolar system more conflict is likely as it takes several crises or even war for the system to stabilize into a true bipolar structure. China's military capabilities are yet to reach a parity threshold to claim bipolarity. Even when it emerges as bipolar, a form of stability-instability paradox could emerge which means there is stability at the strategic level but instability at

the sub-strategic level. The early US-Soviet bipolarity was riddled with crises and the biggest them all, the 1962 Cuban missile crisis that somewhat settled the central strategic equilibrium. Even then, the superpowers overindulged in proxy wars in the global south regions and this was not a period of true peace as many Western scholars assert.

East Asia shows that power capabilities of leading states can change in a significant way during a short period, and domestic politics and leader dispositions can encourage them to engage in aggressive and expansionist moves. Neither balance of power nor hegemonic stability thus is a permanent state of affair, as power configurations change, the effect of both systems on regional order can alter. The specific foreign policies of states may be affected by domestic changes or leadership attitudes, as intervening variables, an argument neoclassical realist scholars have made (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016). It is possible to extrapolate the catalyst role great power relationships play in regional order transitions in conjunction with regionally-driven causations. It may very well be a function of the degree of autonomy a given region possesses vis-à-vis the great power system and how 'rebellious' or 'compliant' regional actors are toward great power hegemony (Väyrynen, 1984). This great power role in regional peace may depend on how 'captive' a region is to the exclusive sphere of influence of a great power or how 'contested' it is to contending great powers. A region can also be of 'intrinsic' or 'extrinsic' or 'negative' value to the great powers or it can be 'engaged' or 'autonomous' (Merom, 2003). In this sense, the US had a near-captive region in East Asia during the first two decades of the post-Cold War era, but during the Cold War era, it was contested. The emerging regional orders may depend on the extent of contestation between the US and China and how regional states can manage to escape tight great power grip through their own institutional and national strategies. As T.J. Pempel argues in his article in this special issue, regional states, especially the middle-ranking powers such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and combined ASEAN states have been making strong efforts to avoid intense great power conflict and domination by China by offering alternate models for trade, investment and quality infrastructure development. It requires painstaking analysis to extrapolate which variable matters at which point in time as well as how the variables are configured.

Even when the superstructures of power relations are explained by realist variables, substructures and micro changes can possibly rely on liberal mechanisms. In this sense, liberal institutions are often enablers of or contributors to peaceful regional order (i.e., varieties of cold peace, normal peace and warm peace). For instance, deep economic interdependence can mitigate conflict among regional states. Democracy among the regional states can also offer pacific conditions. Similarly, regional institutions can

exert restraints on conflictual behavior. These conditions do not emerge or sustain without favorable underlying security conditions. These liberal conditions can also encourage states to eschew hard balancing while resorting to soft balancing and other hedging mechanisms (Paul, 2018). Asymmetric network structures create the potential for 'weaponized interdependence,' in which some states are able to leverage interdependent relations to coerce others. Specifically, states with political authority over the central nodes in the international networked structures through which money, goods, and information travel are uniquely positioned to impose costs on others. 'If they have appropriate domestic institutions, they can weaponize networks to gather information or choke off economic and information flows, discover and exploit vulnerabilities, compel policy change, and deter unwanted actions' (Farrell & Newman, 2019, p. 45).

Liberal mechanisms are also affected by material changes among leading states, especially the distribution of power involving economic, military and technological capabilities. Trade independencies can change as new states emerge as trading leaders or some obtain rapid technological and economic and military advancements. Liberal institutions can facilitate this process, but they need not resolve conflict possibilities of all emerging contingencies. International institutions can decline as we saw in the Trump era and the ups and downs in institutional development can affect regional order as well as the global order. If institutions reflect power realities, structural changes need to be factored into this dynamic, which liberals are often reluctant to do (Wivel & Paul, 2019). Moreover, both realism and liberalism are state-centric approaches and they do not pay much attention to domestic politics or personality attributes of leaders. More importantly, identity politics shaped by historical disputes and memories of aggression and humiliation as we are witnessing in some key countries in Asia could up-end both realist and liberal mechanisms of peace. The conflictual relationships between sub-state actors, in particular insurgent groups and states, can be critical in determining regional orders, especially among rival powers competing over territory and identity.

Realist insights on power relations are useful for understanding the initial phase of regional orders after a pivotal event similar to the end of World War II or the end of the Cold War when opportunities emerged for second-ranking states to engage, balance or bandwagon with great powers. If the great power relations are intensely conflictual, weaker states will find it hard to form independent foreign policies. This does not mean that they cannot try doing so, as newly emerging Asian and African states attempted through the non-aligned mechanism in the 1950s and 1960s. ASEAN states also attempted to restrain great power conflict and management strategies with some success. The end of the Cold War and the arrival of intensified

globalization offered regional states an opportunity to engage in more trade and investment generating high levels of interdependence. Yet, pre-existing territorial and identity conflicts have frequently resurfaced as inhibitors to full blown *warm peace* emerging. Interdependence in some inter-state contexts prevent escalation of limited conflicts and crises, but cannot remove the root causes of the conflict. However, if actors are willing to give certain level of institutional architecture to their relations they can help to mitigate the escalation dynamics, but not remove them altogether. In this way, a hybrid regional order is sustained as great powers are not able to achieve full hegemony or coercion as they were in the past. For that reason, the Chinese efforts to gain hegemony may not be achievable in the short and medium terms. Limited networked hegemony may occur, especially in certain domains coming out of the BRI system. Smaller states do have opportunities to engage in outbidding as they do in South Asia, between China and India (Paul, 2019).

Conclusions

None of the mechanisms presented in Realist or Liberal IR theory predicts *warm peace* to occur in East Asia in the coming years. Balance of power is still tenuous while hegemonic stability is also problematic as both the American hegemony and the Chinese *Tianxia* model, based on a form of hegemonic stability, are challenged by each other. Eclectic approaches to regional order have value as long as it delineates critical variables at different stages of the evolutionary process. It is not the mixing of variable for the sake of it that matters. It is also important to consider what dependent variable one is examining- as these include: stability, instability, order, disorder, cold peace, cold war, war, recurrent crisis, and warm peace or deep peace. The change from one condition to the other need not be linear as regressions can happen. The *warm peace* among most European Union members is an ideal model this is unlikely to be replicated in East Asia with its lingering territorial and identity conflicts and competition over spheres of influence. Even in the expanded European Union today, fissures are developing as many states are falling victims to populist and xenophobia of a few right-wing leaders.

Regional order is path-dependent, with a continuum with critical junctures and turning points, but these junctures are partially determined by realist and liberal factors, with the latter gaining uppermost role in determining politico-military dominance or balance among key states. The contention here is that we will need to go beyond these core IR paradigms and examine the specific linkages through which order is created, sustained and evolved in a given region. Each stage in the evolution of regional order may be driven by a variable crucial to a given paradigm but as umbrella

theories they are not fully satisfactory. When and how regional transformations happen need to be examined more rigorously. Regional order can assume different possibilities beyond the war-peace continuum and mixed varieties can develop within a region. We are witnessing such a mixed pattern in East Asia, where while trade interdependencies are increasing, territorial conflicts are not declining proportionately, that too involving the biggest beneficiary of trade, China, which acts like a typical Westphalian territorial state unable to compromise on self-serving claims, based on specious historical evidence. The partial U.S. hegemony in the Korean peninsula and Taiwan may not be sustained perpetually without additional liberal mechanisms such as democratic peace or deep institutional restraints entering the picture. The regional order thus is likely to be a hybrid variety, as I argue in some parts of Northeast Asia, *cold peace* continuing, while in Southeast Asia *regular peace* is likely to be maintained. None could become *warm peace* in the foreseeable future. The *cold peace* has more probability to lead to *cold war* as power transition and great power rivalries strengthen even when economic interdependence and limited institutions prevent full fledged military escalations.

Notes

1. Several IR books have emerged since the 1990s on regional orders. See for examples Lake and Morgan (1997), Buzan and Waver (2003), Katzenstein (2005), Acharya (2001), Miller (2007), and Paul (2012).
2. These concepts are developed in *States, Nations and the Great Powers* (Miller, 2007, pp. 42–47).
3. The ‘regional security complex’ approach captures the role of great powers in determining the regional order in the security domain (Buzan, 1991; Buzan & Waver, 2003).
4. I use the same definition of region I developed in a previous work: “A cluster of states that are proximate to each other and are interconnected in spatial, cultural, and ideational terms in a significant and distinguishable manner” (Paul, 2012, p. 4).
5. Some scholars see a neglect of regional orders in realist theory. This regional void” is largely the function of the theory’s focus on the international system and the great power relations that define it. See Merom (2003).
6. For classical balance of power theory, see Claude (1962), Sheehan (1996), Kissinger (2014), Little (2007), and Paul et al. (2004).
7. On this, see various chapters in Feng and He (2020).
8. See Kang (2010).
9. For such a perspective, see Singh (2020).

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