The Rise of China and the Future American Role in Asia

By Seok-Hyun Hong

A call for mutual respect and co-existence among great and small powers in East Asia, adapted from the acceptance speech by Seok-Hyun Hong, chairman of South Korean newspaper company JoongAng Ilbo and broadcaster JTBC, at the Pacific Century Institute’s Building Bridges Award in February this year.

THE RISE OF CHINA is a new development in East Asia that altered the accepted geopolitical reality of a relatively weak China that had been true since the Opium Wars in the 19th century, if not before. The unexpectedly rapid rise of China not only poses challenges for China itself but also for the future development of other nations in East Asia, specifically Korea and Japan. The challenge of engaging China is also very real for the United States. In the case of Korea, a country which finds itself in close geographical proximity to China while it remains a staunch US ally, the rise of China is a matter of vital concern. How that rise will unfold will have a profound impact on Korea’s future.

There is a Chinese proverb, “One mountain cannot accommodate two tigers” (yī shān bù róng èr hǔ or 一山不容二虎). This saying suggests that there can only be one dominant power in a region. If this saying applies to East Asia, then we can assume that China and the US will inevitably get into various irresolvable conflicts in East Asia because each country will strive to be the dominant power. But is the saying really applicable to the situation in East Asia, which has its own unique characteristics? More importantly, what steps can we take to make sure that the inevitable differences that arise between the two tigers do not result in a serious geopolitical struggle? How can we make sure that the two tigers co-exist without fighting for dom-
In East Asia, the supremacy of one particular state is no longer a significant concern. Instead, the main concern of the nations that form a community is the pursuit of co-prosperity and mutual benefit. The stakeholders have clear roles and responsibilities in the resolution of common problems and that process assures stability and predictability.

East Asia may not have reached that degree of institutional and cultural integration yet. Nevertheless, the development of shared financial institutions and the launch of the Trilateral Co-operation Secretariat (Korea, China and Japan) in 2011 suggest that East Asia is heading in the same direction as Europe. That said, the unique historical legacy of East Asia, and certain cultural characteristics, make the current situation a confusing mix of new trends and vestiges of the past. A stable and peaceful order may well emerge in Northeast Asia, but it will be culturally and structurally distinct from Europe.

THE TWO TIGERS FINDING A WAY

Therefore, the essential question we need to ask when we consider China’s rise and the continuing role of the US in East Asia is this: how can we orchestrate in a smooth manner, this profound shift in East Asia to a horizontal order based on reciprocal relations granted the continuing vestiges of the old order? We must guard against a struggle between the nations of the realm for supremacy, a struggle that will not only undermine the global trend towards reciprocal relations, but would ultimately be detrimental to all nations in the region. East Asia should not revert to outmoded models of the past; to realize this goal, I believe that the US must take on new and innovative roles in East Asia to present a powerful vision. Furthermore, I believe that we must include China in that vision and lay out the contributions that Beijing must make.

If we look at the history of the past century in East Asia, we see many precedents for co-operation between the US and China, and they provide concrete suggestions as to what the foundations for a stable East Asian order might be. When China was in decline and subject to exploitation at the hands of Western imperialism, US policies with regard to China were clearly different from those of the imperialist powers. At the time, the US promoted the “open door” policy for free trade with China based on Secretary of State John Hay’s demand in 1899 that all European
powers allow for free trade with China and not show favoritism in economic affairs. In addition, the US was practically the only great power with no territorial ambitions for expansion into China. Quite the opposite, the US played a major role in the Second World War, in which it was allied with China, in defeating Imperial Japan and freeing China from the state of semi-colonialism it had suffered for a century.

There were profound changes in the relationship of the US and China after the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949 and Washington backed the Kuomintang Party, which fled to Taiwan. The resulting Cold War created a new geopolitical order wherein America intervened and engaged, more deeply in East Asian affairs, often with a positive effect, but also with the assumption that there was a threat from “communist” China that had to be countered. The US and China even clashed militarily on the Korean Peninsula in 2001. The US offered an international order that was not imperialist in nature and that encouraged self-determination in the tradition of Woodrow Wilson. These precedents for a positive US role hint at the potential for a new order that fully integrates China, engaging it as a major power with clear rights and responsibilities. That is to say, there is a way for two tigers to work together for peace, stability and co-prosperity in the realm.

I am skeptical that the countries in East Asia can create a new geopolitical order all on their own. East Asian countries do not have the experience with modern international relations and regional co-operation that we have witnessed in Europe over the last 300 years, plus there are serious concerns that past conflicts over history and territory may reignite at any time. What we have seen over the last century, starting with the “open door” policy for trade, is that when an outside force, in this case the US, plays the role of an honest broker, it becomes easier to build a stable and reciprocal order in East Asia.

The US has responded to China’s rise with a policy of “Asian rebalancing,” or the “pivot to Asia.” I believe that the new economic role of East Asia in the world demands that Washington focus its resources more on responding to the emergence of East Asia. But China, because of its painful experience with colonialism, has displayed a tendency to misread any moves to increase US engagement in Asia as a ploy to contain and encircle China. The US rebalance strategy has shown that it is capable of such growth before and today’s achievements. We can understand, even if we disagree, why the Chinese tend to harbor skepticism towards America’s intentions and retain a sense of victimization vis-à-vis external powers. Also, behind the obvious pride the Chinese take in their achievements, there remain concerns about domestic challenges brought on by rapid economic growth. The combination of wariness over outside forces and concerns over domestic issues are fanning nationalism in China. America needs to make sure it does not give the impression that its legitimate concerns for a stable and reciprocal order in East Asia are an attempt to subvert China’s rise.

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The US rebalance & China’s wariness

Overall, the actions of America, as the dominant outside force in East Asia over the past century, have contributed to peace, stability and prosperity in the region as it witnessed a war led by Imperial Japan, the Cold War, rapprochement with China and then the post-Cold War era. The US offered an international order that was not imperialist in nature and that encouraged self-determination in the tradition of Woodrow Wilson. These precedents for a positive US role hint at the potential for a new order that fully integrates China, engaging it as a major power with clear rights and responsibilities. That is to say, there is a way for two tigers to work together for peace, stability and co-prosperity in the realm.

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CO-OPERATIVE TREES

There is another ancient Chinese proverb that suggests an alternative paradigm for imagining the future of East Asia: “The cypress tree is happiest in a lush pine forest” — in Chinese 宋 漬 木 伴 檳 畠 (松 漬 木 伴 檳 畠) and in Korean 송무백열 (송무백열). If the international community wants to encourage China to co-operate with other nations and to contribute more to creating an open community in East Asia, the US should take the lead in welcoming China’s rise and engaging China through dialogue in diverse fields and on different levels, from elementary students to college professors, from local government officials to CEOs of major corporations. If the US welcomes a flourishing China, I believe that Beijing will respond and play a more responsible role. China has shown that it is capable of such growth before and it shows signs now that it will move towards a new order in the region based on mutual respect, co-existence and co-prosperity. We can convince the Chinese that it is the trees on the mountain that grow together in a symbiotic manner, and not the hungry tigers that wander over the mountain that should be our model.

The US must play a leadership role in encouraging a common agenda for collaboration in
The best way to build a new order in East Asia is to establish successful precedents for co-operation. I believe that resolving the controversy over North Korea's nuclear program could be such a model case. North Korea's recent nuclear test, the fourth, demands a speedy and unified response from all the nations of East Asia. If we want a meaningful resolution of North Korea's nuclear issue, and I believe it is possible, we must not let ourselves be sidetracked by geopolitical strategies. Rather, we should focus on the core values of nuclear non-proliferation and regional security, and we should engage closely with each other, while speaking seriously with the North Koreans.

Although the agenda of the Six-Party Talks so far has been limited to the question of North Korean nuclearization, it nonetheless has served as an unprecedented venue for negotiations that include the major countries of Northeast Asia. If our joint efforts bear fruit this time around, the Six-Party Talks could serve as a precedent for meaningful multilateral governance. If the United States can address serious issues together with Northeast Asian countries in the case of North Korea, it will be a dramatic example of co-operation between the US and China. We can build on that collaboration, and other previous agreements for co-operation in the response to climate change and military exchanges, to set up a stable long-term vision for the relationship.

An agreement between the US and China for a joint response to security threats will be a critical precedent for trust building and economic co-operation that will result in closer ties between the nations of East Asia as a whole. Such a universal shift will be the only way to induce North Korea, the only isolated country in East Asia, to join the common current of our times.

The reality of geography makes it inevitable that America and China are here to stay in East Asia. We expect that China will search for constructive ways to support co-existence and co-prosperity and that such an effort will include a pragmatic acceptance of the US presence as a constant and stabilizing element. I hope that China will welcome America's role in East Asia and take the “cypress and pine tree approach” to the engagement of the two nations in the region and with each other. Rather than using its newfound political and economic might to project its influence outward in an assertive manner, I hope to see China exert its efforts toward domestic and regional development that is aimed at increasing prosperity. It must demonstrate far-sighted leadership by co-operating with the US to create a future-oriented order. The US, on the other hand, should openly recognize that China can be a good partner to promote peace and prosperity. China, likewise, should understand that in this globalized world there is no way to go back to a traditional order. Both parties should recognize this reality and find an ideal balance that benefits all.

**THE KOREAN ROLE**

As a middle power in Northeast Asia with close multilateral relations with all its neighbors, South Korea is a threat to no one. An ally of the US, with deep-rooted relations with Japan, and a significant partnership with China and Russia, Korea is in a unique position to push forward the establishment of a community based on mutual respect, co-prosperity and interdependence. I also believe that Korea can function as a facilitator to create a new order built on common ground between the US and China and East Asia as a whole. As a nation with no history of colonialism or imperialism, that role on the part of Korea would be welcomed by East Asian nations. It would raise Korea's stature and also create a favorable environment in the region to support efforts toward unification on the Korean Peninsula.

As a citizen of Korea, the middle power in East Asia that is so deeply committed to a multilateral co-operative future, it is my sincere wish to see a new order of mutual respect and co-existence like that which we have seen flower in Europe take root in East Asia. We can create a new order in East Asia wherein nations, big and small, like trees, entangle their roots together beneath the earth and mingle their branches together above our heads to form a green and peaceful canopy. Tigers of all stripes will be welcome to come and go as they please in that luxuriant green.

Seek-Hyun Hong is chairman of JoongAng Ilbo, one of South Korea’s largest newspapers, and broadcaster JTBC. He was South Korea’s Ambassador to the United States in 2005.

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