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To cite this article: Bhubhindar Singh (2022) Minimal peace in Northeast Asia: a realist-liberal explanation, *The Pacific Review*, 35:6, 1049-1078, DOI: [10.1080/09512748.2022.2075441](https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2075441)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2075441>



Published online: 18 May 2022.



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Minimal peace in Northeast Asia: a realist-liberal explanation

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ABSTRACT

Northeast Asia is usually associated with conflict and war. Challenging this prevailing view, this article shows that the sub-region has achieved minimal peace since its peaceful transition from the Cold War to the post-Cold War period. The questions posed are: (a) what factors are responsible for Northeast Asia's minimal peace?; and (b) how will these factors respond to the worsening US-China competition since 2010? This article's argument is two-fold. First, Northeast Asia's minimal peace is explained by three realist-liberal factors: America's hegemony; strong economic interdependence among the Northeast Asian states; and a stable institutional structure in East Asia, including Northeast Asia. These factors kept a stable balance of power, ensured development and prosperity, and mitigated the political and strategic tensions between the states. Second, Northeast Asia's minimal peace would be durable to counter the negative effects of the Sino-US competition in the coming decades. While the economic interdependence and institutional building factors have shown resilience, the US hegemony faces a robust challenge from China. Nevertheless, the US hegemony is durable because of America's enduring relative strategic and economic advantages over China, the expanded role of America's regional allies to preserve US preponderance and China's problems in building an alternative regional order.

KEYWORDS Northeast Asia; peace; United States; interdependence; institutions

Introduction

Northeast Asia¹ has always been associated with conflict and war. This characterisation has carried into the post-Cold War period, as illustrated by the works published from the early post-Cold War period to date. Analyses shaped by various shades of realism attributed a variety of reasons to argue for increased regional tensions in post-Cold War East Asia, including

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Northeast Asia. These included the negative effects of the multipolar regional order that was expected to replace bipolarity in the post-Cold War period (Betts, 1993; Friedberg, 1993), the negative effects of the post-Cold War's American unipolarity on the regional and global balance of power (Layne, 1993; Waltz, 2000), the negative effects of China's rise as a regional hegemon and its dissatisfaction with the American-led status quo order (Friedberg, 2011; Mearsheimer, 2001, 2010), and the negative effects of North Korea's progressive development of its ballistic and nuclear programmes coupled by its belligerent behaviour (Byman & Lind, 2010; Cha & Kang, 2003). The scepticism of the realists matched a strand of social constructivist argument that focused on the 'return of history' factor, which was unique to Northeast Asia. The unresolved historical legacy, mainly stemming from Japanese colonial practices, raised nationalistic sentiments in China, Japan and South Korea. This strained bilateral relations, raised regional tensions and hampered regional integration (Berger, 2008, 2012; He, 2007).

This article makes the point that Northeast Asia has achieved 'minimal peace' since the peaceful transition from the Cold War to the post-Cold War periods. The notion of 'minimal peace' conforms to Paul's (2020) minimalist understanding of 'peaceful change' defined as 'international change and transformation without the use of military force and war' (p. 4). This is opposed to the maximalist definition of peaceful change defined as change brought about by 'not only the absence of war, but also the achievement of sustained non-violent cooperation for creating a more just world order' (Paul, 2020, p. 4). Though Northeast Asia somewhat meets the maximalist definition (due to the sustained absence of regional conflicts, growing levels of economic interdependence and greater institutionalism integration into the East Asian multilateral order), the sub-region is far from meeting the conditions of a 'maximal' or 'deep' or 'warm' peace, as elaborated in TV Paul's paper in this issue (Paul, 2020). This is because the Northeast Asian order is characterised by several features that could easily undermine its hard-earned minimal peace. These include: (1) its strategic challenges (China's strategic rise and increasingly assertive foreign policy strategy, the volatility of the Korean Peninsula, and the presence of several unresolved territorial disputes); (2) the presence of historical antagonism between the states; (3) its weak institutionalism; and (4) its regional architecture that is still defined by vestiges of the previous Cold War order (such as, the presence of communist (China) or Stalinist regimes (North Korea) and divided states in form of the Korean Peninsula). These features have caused serious political and strategic tensions in Northeast Asia, even resulting in the failure of some states to sign bilateral peace treaties following the end of WWII (such as, Japan-North Korea).

The article addresses two questions: (1) what are the factors that contribute to Northeast Asia's condition of minimal peace?; and (2) how will these factors respond to the worsening US-China structural competition since 2010? This article's argument is divided into two parts. The first argues that Northeast Asia's minimal peace is explained by three realist-liberal factors. The realist factor refers to the US hegemony in East Asia, including Northeast Asia. America's hegemony not only provided strategic stability to the region, but also had a 'pacifying' effect through preventing regional crises from escalating into conflicts, resolving diplomatic spats and preventing a full-blown regional arms race. The liberal factors refer to the growing economic interdependence between the Northeast Asian states (especially between China, Japan and South Korea) and the sub-region's strengthening institutionalism, along with the Northeast Asian states' strong engagement in the East Asian multilateral structure covering economic, political and security issues. While the former brought prosperity and development to the region, the latter facilitated regional cooperation, regularised dialogue, and built familiarity between these states. The second part of the argument is that, despite the worsening Sino-US competition since 2010, Northeast Asia's minimal peace is durable in the coming decades. However, it will be supported by a 'renegotiated' system. While the economic interdependence and institutional building factors have shown resilience, the American hegemony is faced with a robust challenge from China's rise. Nevertheless, the article shows that US hegemony is an enduring factor for regional peace and stability. This is because of America's extant relative strategic and economic advantages over China, the expanded support from America's regional allies to sustain US hegemony and China's problems in building an alternative regional order.

This article is a contribution to a small body of literature that argues for peace or stability in post-Cold War Northeast Asia.² Using the notion of 'stability', Choi (2016) argued that Northeast Asia is defined by 'crisis stability', which refers to the lack of war or 'major militarised disputes', and further argues that Northeast Asia is increasingly defined by 'general stability', which refers to the condition when war becomes 'inconceivable as a means of solving their political conflicts' (pp. 289–90). This is due to the strengthening liberal and ideational elements in the region, such as 'intensified economic interdependence and idea of war-aversion' (p. 290). Using an ideational approach, Choi and Moon (2010) argued for stability in Northeast Asia due to the existence of shared explicit and implicit regional norms related to the promotion of cooperation, economic development and multilateral security cooperation, as well as to war aversion. Countering the prevailing pessimism related to Northeast Asia, Calder and Ye (2010) argued that Northeast has shown stronger collaboration and cohesiveness in the

post-Cold War period. The authors used the critical-juncture framework to show how the sub-region overcame an 'organization gap' to create strengthened regionalism in Northeast Asia.

This article is different from the extant literature in two ways. First, it offers a syncretic realist-liberal approach to explain the conditions of minimal peace in Northeast Asia. While it recognises the important contribution of liberal factors, this article underplays the role of ideational factors, such as the idea of war aversion and collective norms that promote economic, political and security cooperation to explain peace and stability in Northeast Asia. The rapid pace of military modernization in Northeast Asia, China's repeated threats to use force against Taiwan's independence and the weaponization of economic relations between Northeast Asian states through various measures, such as export controls, undermine the utility of ideational variables as determinants of regional peace and stability. Instead, the article combines the effects of the realist factors, such as the US hegemony, regional balance of power and the US-China competition, with the organizing principles of liberal institutionalism – economic interdependence and institution-building – to explain minimal peace in Northeast Asia. The realist factors account for the sources that maintain a stable regional balance of power; and the liberal factors account for the sources of growth, development and cooperation among the Northeast Asian states.

Second, instead of 'stability' as used in previous research, this article is located within the emerging 'peace and peaceful change' literature (see Paul et al., 2020). Though there is overlap, this article distinguishes the notions of 'peace' and 'stability'. While 'stability' refers to a condition when there is an absence of an armed conflict between states, 'peace' refers to the sustained condition of 'stability' for a prolong period. In short, 'stability' is the element that enables 'peace'. This article aims to strengthen the utility of the peace and peaceful change concepts both conceptually and empirically through its application on Northeast Asia, which has been an unpopular endeavour. This is not only due to its turbulent history, as noted above, but also due to the cast of actors in the region. It comprises of former imperial powers (the US, Japan and Russia), a former militarist power (Japan), a former superpower (Russia), a rising power (China) and the only remaining superpower (the US). These actors have clashing interests that make the resolution of the key regional strategic and political challenges very difficult (Kim, 2004, 5). Nevertheless, this article endeavours to make a case for Northeast Asia as an appropriate case study for the study of peace and peaceful change.

This article is structured as follows. The first section begins with the origins of minimal peace in Northeast Asia dating back to the onset of the

postwar period. This discussion is important to understand the peaceful transition from the Cold War to the post-Cold War periods. This section also introduces the realist-liberal framework that have contributed to the minimal peace in Northeast Asia. The second section focuses on how the three factors contributed to the minimal peace in Northeast Asia during the 1990–2009 period. The third section shows how the three factors, albeit with some adjustments, continue to support minimal peace in Northeast Asia despite the worsening Sino-US competition since 2010. The conclusion offers a summary and implications of the argument.

Emergence of minimal peace – realist-liberal framework

The foundation of Northeast Asia's minimal peace during the post-Cold War period was laid following the turbulent end of WWII and the subsequent emergence of the Cold War. The Cold War had two contrasting consequences on Northeast Asia. On the one hand, the sub-region was divided reflecting the bipolar structure and experienced two large-scale wars (the Korean War (1950–4) and the Vietnam War (1960s–75)) that caused widespread physical, human and psychological devastation, along with a long-term division of the Korean Peninsula. On the other hand, the US incorporated East Asia, including Northeast Asia, into its postwar liberal internationalist order. In geostrategic terms, the US constructed a security architecture centred on the hub-and-spoke alliance system. This involved the installation of an extensive alliance network with military bases in Japan and South Korea to support the largest US military deployment in East Asia critical to countering the communist threat and maintaining a stable regional balance of power. In geoeconomics and geopolitical terms, the US formed an order that promoted open and free trade, international institutions (such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), and liberal democracies (Ikenberry, 2018, 15–16; Layne, 2018, pp. 90–93).

From the 1970s, the US hegemony became entrenched in Northeast Asia. Through promoting economic prosperity and development (through its ally Japan) and security (through the network of alliances), America solidified its role as a source of peace and stability in East Asia (He, 2019, 143). The US hegemonic order was so extensive in Northeast Asia that the three main countries of the region – Japan, South Korea and China (after early-1970s) – were subsumed within the US camp during the Cold War. Northeast Asian states saw the benefits of supporting this order first-hand, as it brought prosperity and economic development, and for the allies especially, the alliance network contributed to the region's peace and stability.

This US strategy was so successful that it not only laid the foundation for the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, but it also made sure that the US had no competitor in the post-Cold War period. Japan, who was a serious strategic threat in the previous order and emerged as an economic threat in the 1980s, underwent a major transformation in the postwar period to become a positive contributor to the peace and stability of East Asia. With the signing of the US-Japan security alliance, Japan became a critical ally of the US during the Cold War and a host of the largest American military deployment in East Asia. It withdrew from military-strategic affairs and focused its energies on economic growth and development that facilitated its emergence as an economic superpower. This facilitated Japan becoming a critical engine of growth for East Asia's economy through its trade, investments and aid policies (see Pyle, 2007).

Along with Japan, China also experienced a transformation from the 1970s following the Sino-US rapprochement triggered by the Nixon-Mao meeting in 1971. This meeting led to the full normalization of US-China relations in 1979 and, consequently, weakening of the Communist bloc in favour of the America-led liberal international order. Guided by the dictum 'hide your strength, bide your time', Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, implemented reforms from the late-1970s resulting in China's prioritization of economic development and economic globalization over building military strength (Zheng, 2005). This strategy radically transformed China's confrontational foreign policy posture (Wang, 2011). From its participation in the Korean War, support of communist struggles and armed revolutions in non-communist East Asia states and experience of the disastrous social-political campaigns (Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution), China emerged as a capitalist state and became a member of the international community. Though the Cold War ended with the Chinese government's violent crackdown of a student-led democratic movement in 1989, Deng's economic reforms laid the foundation for China's rapid rise as a dominant economic, political and security actor in the post-Cold War period. In short, the success of the US hegemonic order facilitated the peaceful transition of Northeast Asia from the Cold War to the post-Cold War period. This was a milestone in Northeast Asia's history, as previous regional order transitions (Chinese World Order (circa 618AD to the mid-19th century) to the period of imperialism (mid-19th century to 1930); period of imperialism to the period of Fascism (1930–1945); from the period of fascism that triggered WWII to the Cold War (1946–1989) were far from peaceful.

With this background, this article explains that the condition of minimal peace in post-Cold War Northeast Asia is grounded in the US-led liberal international order. To be sure, the liberal internationalist framework installed in Northeast/East Asia possessed unique features compared to

Europe. Instead of a multilateral security alliance, the US succumbed to pressure from regional states to install an alliance network Northeast/East Asia (Izumikawa, 2020). Also, Northeast/East Asia failed to develop an overarching regional institution, such as the European Union. Even though regional allies and partners participated in US-led international institutions, such as the IMF, World Bank, the UN and others, Northeast Asia suffered from an 'organization gap' (Calder & Ye, 2010) and Southeast Asia developed its own brand of institutionalism that was governed by features unique to the region (Ba, 2009; Goh, 2007–2008, see the article by Caballero-Anthony and Emmers in this special issue). Despite these differences, the article argues that the American liberal internationalist framework provided an overarching structure for the region during both the Cold War and post-Cold War periods. It served as a critical enabler for the maintenance of regional peace and stability, the promotion of economic prosperity and the strengthening of intra- and inter-regional institutionalism. Grounded in the US-led liberal international order, this article identifies three realist-liberal factors to explain the conditions of minimal peace in post-Cold War Northeast Asia. The realist factor is the US hegemony and the liberal factors are the two 'organizing principles/ideas of liberal internationalism' – economic interdependence and institution-building (Ikenberry, 2018).

Despite Michael Mastanduno's claim of its 'incompleteness', the American hegemony in East Asia, including in Northeast Asia, was reinforced in the post-Cold War period.³ This led to the emergence of a unipolar structural order where the US had no hegemonic competitor. The unipolarity framework argued that the US possessed superior power indicators in all the key domains – military, economic, technology, and geopolitical – compared to its competitors (Wohlforth, 1999, 7). These indicators placed the US in a unique position in geoeconomics, geopolitical and geostrategic terms that ensures peace and stability in the international system. This is achieved through countering either a hegemonic competition for leadership of the international system or other actions by major powers that could directly challenge US unipolarity (Beckley, 2018, pp. 3–4; Wohlforth, 1999, pp. 7–8).

According to experts, American unipolarity is not a 'moment' but has lasting power. This is even in response to China's robust political, economic and strategic rise. Beckley (2018) noted that the intensifying US-China competition is not a period of power transition but a continuation of the American unipolar era (pp. 3–4). The sustainability of the US is explained by its relative advantages over its competitors. These include: (1) its superior material indicators compared to its competitors, including China, which weakens external constraints on America's comprehensive power; (2) its

strong ability to shape global affairs; and (3) its geographical and demographic advantages over its competitors (Beckley, 2018, p. 2; Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008, 2016; Wohlforth, 1999, 28–37). While these factors correctly explain the sustainability of US hegemony at the global level, their applicability at the regional level, especially in Northeast Asia, is less clear. This is due to China's asymmetric military strategy and geography-based advantages – factors that have the potential to weaken America's regional strategic edge. Nevertheless, this article shows that the US hegemony is durable and remains a critical source of peace and stability in Northeast Asia but in a 'renegotiated' arrangement.⁴ This is not only because of America's extant relative strategic and economic advantages over China, as argued by the unipolarity scholars, but also due to two other factors – the proactive effort by its regional allies to preserve US hegemony and China's problems in building an alternative regional order.

The second and third factors focus on the 'liberal' side of the American liberal internationalist order. This order is defined by the following features: creating an open global economy that promoted free-trade but yet allowed states to balance the tensions between open-trade and domestic economic stability; creating international institutions that supported the open world economy and provided 'a system of multilateral governance'; and spreading liberal democracy and its related norms and values among states (Ikenberry, 2018, pp. 15–17). As outlined above, the US-led overarching structure ensured a stable balance of power in Northeast Asia, brought decades of economic prosperity, integrated the region into the postwar institutional order and promoted democracy in the region.

However, from the late-2000s to 2010, Ikenberry (2011, 2018) noted that the US liberal internationalist order was in 'crisis'. The US was facing a 'crisis of authority' over the '... distribution of roles, rights and authority within the liberal international order' (Ikenberry, 2011, p. xii). Nevertheless, Ikenberry (2011) was careful to note that this '... is a crisis of authority *within* the old hegemonic organization of liberal order, *not*, a crisis in the deep principles of the order itself. It is a crisis of governance' (p. 6, italics from original). This led Ikenberry to detach the principles of the liberal order from the US hegemony. He wrote 'The American hegemonic organization of liberal order is weakening, but the more general organizing ideas and impulses of liberal internationalism run deep in world politics' (Ikenberry, 2018, p. 8). This is true for Northeast Asia. Instead of being 'receivers' as it was during the Cold War period, the Northeast Asian states have internalised the liberal internationalist principles in their foreign policy strategies. They have shown agency in building or strengthening the Northeast Asian order through their support of open-trade and globalization, multilateralism and institutionalism, cooperative security, and, more

recently, international law. Even China, the main challenger the US hegemony, has relied on some of the principles of liberal internationalism to build its preferred regional order.

To explain minimal peace in Northeast Asia, this article focuses on two organizing principles/ideas of liberal internationalism to complement the realist US hegemony factor. The first is the growing economic interdependence between Northeast Asian states (namely, China, Japan and South Korea). The foundation for this was laid during the Cold War when these states subscribed to the open and free market system, relied on American and Japanese investments, and benefitted from a robust institutional international economic structure. This promoted the prioritisation of economic growth and prosperity by Northeast Asian states, facilitated regional economic cooperation and limited integration, and prevented policymakers from 'crisis-provoking' decisions due to the high costs of war on economic prosperity (Kim, 2016, 721). The second factor is the strengthening institutionalism in Northeast Asia and in East Asia (ASEAN-led and non-ASEAN-led institutionalism) covering economic, political and security issues. This is a post-Cold War phenomenon that has strengthened regional governance, facilitated regional cooperation, regularised regional dialogue, and built familiarity between states – collectively reducing the chances of inter-state conflict (see papers by Anthony-Caballero and Emmers and He in this issue).⁵

Though the framework outlined above resembles Ikenberry's (2011) realist-liberal framework, it differs in a significant way. Unlike Ikenberry's framework that fuses the realist and liberal factors, this article analyses the effects of these factors separately. This is important for two reasons. First, the separation of the factors is to underscore the critical contribution of the realist factors, especially the American hegemony's contribution to the regional balance of power, in explaining Northeast Asia's minimal peace. This is due to the entrenched uncertainty caused by the regional challenges, such as China's rise and assertiveness, long-standing territorial disputes, volatility of the Korean Peninsula and rising nationalism in all Northeast Asian states. Second, the separation of the realist and liberal factors captures changes to the factors that provide for minimal peace in Northeast Asia between the two periods studied. While the organizing ideas/principles of liberal internationalism continue to provide for minimal peace in both periods (1990–2009 and post-2010), the realist factor saw an adjustment in how it contributes to Northeast Asia's minimal peace. During the 1990–2009 period, the America's hegemony was unquestioned, as it faced little external challenges. However, in the post-2010 period, the robust challenge from China is challenging American hegemony and its ability to maintain the regional balance of power. The following two sections explain how the

three factors contributed to minimal peace in the 1990–2009 and post-2010 periods.

1990–2009: Strengthening of minimal peace

The peaceful transition from the Cold War to the post-Cold War period introduced a sense of optimism that the global order was moving away from inter-state conflicts (Singh, 2011). Yet, at the same time, there was high uncertainty in Northeast Asia. While the Cold War had ended in Europe, this was not the case in Northeast Asia. The Northeast Asian order still featured the vestiges of the Cold War, such as the divided Korean Peninsula, the US-led alliance network, and the presence of Communist China and Stalinist North Korea. Despite these features and the pessimistic readings of East/Northeast Asia that were informed by power politics (Kang, 2003, 61–6), Northeast Asia achieved minimal peace.

American hegemony

Following the demise of the Soviet Union, the US remained an integral factor to Northeast Asia's peace and stability in the post-Cold War period. As the remaining superpower, America's hegemony defined the global balance of power. As the US had superiority in most, if not all, critical measures of power over its competitors, this resulted in a stable US-led unipolarity that preserved American interests and the American liberal internationalism (Wohlforth, 1999, 7). This applied to the East Asia, including Northeast Asia, as well. The US hegemony, supported by the hub-and-spoke alliance system, ensured a stable balance of power in Northeast Asia. This structure had a deterrent effect against the regional strategic challenges, as well as a 'pacifying' effect in mitigating the serious security dilemma concerns between the states (Brooks et al., 2013, p. 37; Wohlforth, 1999).

Moreover, the American conventional and nuclear deterrence countered new challenges from emerging in the region. This was important in light of the strengthening military capabilities of other Northeast Asian states, such as Russia, Japan, and South Korea, who could have targeted each other (Choi, 2016, pp. 295–6). The US presence maintained diplomatic stability between its allies, Japan and South Korea, especially during periods of high political tensions caused by the unresolved historical legacy, and precluded these states from acquiring nuclear capabilities despite the emergence of the North Korean nuclear threat. The dominance of the US in the regional security architecture contributed directly to the region's stable geo-economic order. Its ability to ensure safety of the global commons at sea guaranteed free commerce to thrive, which was absolutely critical for the

Northeast Asian states. Through this proactive strategy during the post-Cold War period, the US maintained its position as the largest economy in the world through the promotion of globalization, open-trade and investments in the region. Overall, the US was able to sustain its regional hegemony in the first two decades of the post-Cold War period; and this was a critical source of peace and stability in Northeast Asia (Brooks et al., 2013, pp. 40–41).

Economic interdependence and institutional-building

Economic interdependence

During the 1990–2009 period, Northeast Asia prospered in economic terms. Japan, China and South Korea achieved sustained economic development through the promotion of international trade and export-oriented strategies that served as engines of regional and global economic growth. These states also strengthened intra- and inter-regional economic cooperation through trade and investments resulting in strengthened economic interdependence. This economic interdependence was critical to each state's economic prosperity and ensured peace and stability in Northeast Asia in light of the political and strategic tensions between the states (Choi, 2016, pp. 302–3). Two inter-related forces drove the strengthening economic interdependence in Northeast Asia: China's rapid economic growth and the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis.

China's economic reforms, which started in the late-1970s, picked up speed in the post-Cold War period. China pushed economic reforms at home and supported international economic globalisation that was reinforced by its entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. This strategy lifted millions of Chinese out of poverty, rapidly expanded China's GDP per capita, integrated China into the world's economy, resulted in China becoming the largest trading partner to all its neighbours in Northeast Asia, and became the engine of growth for East Asia. What is unique about China's economic resurgence is that it happened while it was integrated into the American hegemonic order. This order, supported by liberal internationalist values, brought immense economic and political benefits to China, along with strategic stability that facilitated China's rapid economic, political and strategic rise. Within this structure, China strengthened its foreign policy with others states, including its neighbours and beyond, and became a strong proponent of multilateralism, open-trade and economic globalization.

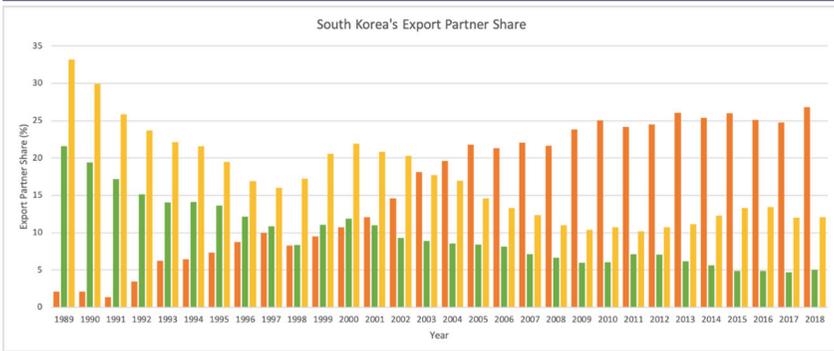
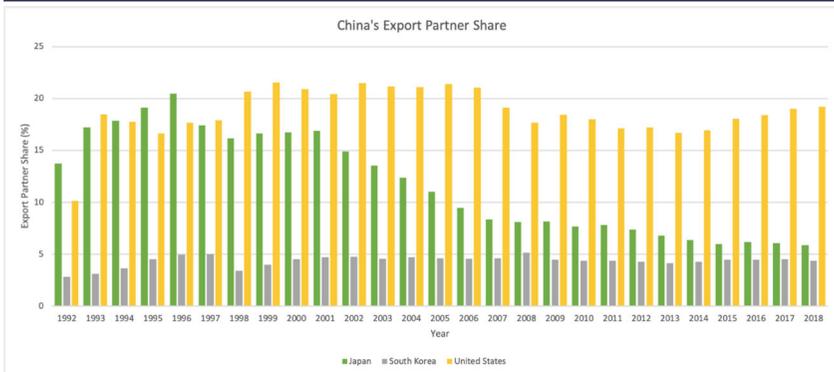
The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis also contributed to the growing interdependence in Northeast Asia. This shared experience of the first post-Cold War economic crisis boosted intra-regional interactions and trade

Table 1. Japan's Export Partner Share to China, South Korea, and the United States from 1989 to 2018 (World Integrated Trade Solution, 2020).

interdependence, as well as deepened intra-industry linkages (such as in auto and electronics) and production networks through government-led and business-led initiatives (Calder & Ye, 2010, p. 129). As Calder and Ye (2010) noted, intra-regional trade between China (including Taiwan and Hong Kong), Japan and South Korea increased following the Asian Financial Crisis. Though the US remained an important trading partner, the share of total exports to the US for China, Japan and South Korea decreased from 2002 as seen in Tables 1–3 – more so for Japan and South Korea than for China. While Japan's and South Korea's export partner share with the US decreased drastically, their share with China saw a gradual growth – pointing to the rising importance of the Chinese economy (see Tables 1 and 2) (Calder & Ye, 2010, p. 130). This impact on strengthened trade dependence, along with increased intra-regional investments, strengthened economic integration of the Northeast Asian region (Calder & Ye, 2010, pp. 130–137). These efforts were not short-lived but were further reinforced following the 2008 global economic crisis. In response to the South Korea's largest devaluation of its currency ever since the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, China and Japan were quick to expand their bilateral currency swap arrangements to assist South Korea, as well as expand trilateral financial cooperation (Terada, 2018).

Institution building

Economic interdependence as a source of peace and stability was complemented by widened support towards institutionalism efforts by Northeast Asian states. Though the region was integrated into the global (UN, the World Bank, the IMF, G7/8 and G20) and inter-regional (Asia-Pacific Cooperation (APEC)) multilateral order, Northeast Asia itself was understood

Table 2. South Korea's Export Partner Share to China, Japan, and the United States from 1989 to 2018 (World Integrated Trade Solution, 2020).**Table 3.** China's Export Partner Share to Japan, South Korea, and the United States from 1992 to 2018 (World Integrated Trade Solution, 2020).

as the least institutionalized sub-region of East Asia. Its experienced in regionalism had been described as 'stunted' due to the high level of mistrust and suspicion between the states (Rozman, 2004). However, a closer look at the region revealed a positive track record in terms of building formal and informal institutions. Northeast Asia had attempted to form or participate in formal region-wide (Northeast Asian Trilateral Summit) and less institutionalized multilateral institutions (Tumen River Area Development Programme). It had formed arrangements to address specific regional challenges, such as the North Korean nuclear issue (Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group, Korea Energy Development Organization, and the Six-Party Talks), as well as a range of political (Tripartite Cooperative Secretariat) and economic issues (Chiang Mai Initiatives).

Northeast Asia's commitment to the institutional-building process in the region and beyond was given a boost by the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis in three ways (Calder & Ye, 2010; Terada, 2003). First, it not only strengthened the participation of Northeast Asia in the East Asian multilateral process, but resulted in enhanced agency on the part of Northeast Asian states to shape and/or build East Asian multilateralism. The Asian Financial Crisis triggered the creation of East Asia-wide institutions meant to solve regional problems through regional solutions following their disappointment with international institutions, namely the World Bank and IMF. This led to the formation of the ASEAN-Plus-Three (APT) and East Asia Summit (EAS) and several other multilateral initiatives, such as the Miyazawa Initiative (1998), Chiang Mai Initiative (2000) and Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization (2009) that required a large injection of funds from Northeast Asian states to create a financial safety net through bilateral currency swap agreements.

Second, a significant consequence of the Asian Financial Crisis was China's proactive support towards regionalism. China took bold steps, such as initiating the ASEAN-China FTA that led to strengthened institutional links with ASEAN, and provided thought leadership in strengthening multilateral cooperation in Northeast Asia through several initiatives, such as the Boao Forum for Asia and the Shanghai Cooperation Dialogue (SCD) that were formed in early 2000s. China's strong support towards regionalism led to its integration into ASEAN-led East Asian wide multilateral structure through multiple platforms, such as the ARF, APT, and EAS. Along with Japan's long history of engagement with ASEAN since the 1970s, China's robust support of the ASEAN-led multilateral order was crucial in integrating the Northeast Asian region into the ASEAN-led multilateral order not only through political and economic institutions, but into security ones as well (Goh, 2007–2008; He, 2019, pp. 147–48).

Third, the Asian Financial Crisis boosted Northeast Asian regionalism comprising of South Korea, China and Japan (Chung, 2011; Terada, 2018). Though first initiated in 1997, the leaders of the three countries started meeting informally on the side-lines of the APT from 1999. Subsequently, all three members recognised the fruits of these meetings and that the ASEAN-led institutions were unable to address Northeast Asia-specific issues. In late 2007, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun proposed a formal annual meeting of the Northeast Asian Trilateral summit between the leaders held in their own territories. From an informal gathering on the side-lines of the APT without an extensive agenda, the trilateral meeting developed into a formal arrangement that promoted policy talks and developed cooperative projects in a range of areas (Yoshimatsu, 2010 pp. 253–6). Despite the limited institutionalization of the trilateral meeting (evinced by the setting up of a secretariat in South Korea), the three countries were

clear on how economic issues should drive the trilateral process, which has remained the case till today. It is important to note that Northeast Asian institutionalism has not been separate from the East Asian order but is part of the robust 'complex patchwork' of East Asian order that includes both the ASEAN-led institutions and non-ASEAN-led institutions (Cha, 2011; Yeo, 2019a). This overarching order has been critical for Northeast Asia's minimal peace. The next section assesses the durability of Northeast Asia's minimal peace in the post-2010 period.

Post-2010: Durability of minimal peace?

Since 2010, Northeast Asia (or even East Asia) is probably on the cusp of another regional transition. This is fuelled by the intensifying structural US-China competition that challenges the US hegemony and the sustainability of the liberal internationalist order. This challenge has come from two factors.

The first is China's emergence as the 'new hegemon' and 'driver of global change' (*The Economist*, 2018). The optimistic reading of China's peaceful rise before 2010 – that China did not view the international environment as hostile; that China did not want to challenge the US for regional supremacy; and that China did not show revisionist tendencies (Kang, 2003 p. 68; Zheng, 2005) – seems to have unravelled. Having abandoned Deng's dictum of 'hide your strength, bide your time', President Xi Jinping's China is pursuing a bolder and more assertive strategy (Poh & Li, 2017). With vast investments in defence spending, China has achieved rapid military modernization in qualitative and quantitative terms. It has produced a more agile and high-tech military able to project military power far from its shores. Along with the use of the anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy supported by advanced air and sea military capabilities, China has gained the ability to counter America's air and sea dominance especially near its coastline (Beckley, 2018, pp. 71–5). In terms of foreign policy, China has shown stronger assertiveness towards Taiwan, Hong Kong, Australia and India, as well as in its maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea (Liu, 2016). China has introduced bold initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was described as the 'project of the century'. It has also made headway in gaining a technological edge over the US especially in areas, such as artificial intelligence, green technology and e-commerce.

At the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held in October 2017, Xi announced that China was on the path of becoming a 'great modern socialist country', and 'a global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence' by 2050 (*China Daily*,

2017). Like all rising powers with such aspirations, it is not far-fetched to conclude that a rising China would seek to change elements of the American hegemonic order, especially those detrimental to its interests and security. Instead, it would promote its preferred elements of regional order, namely creating a 'network of partnerships' and not alliances; promoting equality between big and small states; and no targeting of any third-party country (Zhang, 2018). Even though China continues to positively engage the regional and international community through both regional and multi-lateral institutions, the changes in its foreign and security policy posture since 2010 leads one to question its intentions.

The other factor causing the regional transition is the relative weakening of American hegemony (Heath & Thompson, 2018; Layne, 2018). This was triggered by internal factors exposed by the 2008 economic crisis, external problems revealed by the prolong war on terror, and America's failure to reform the international order in response to the new power configurations (Ikenberry, 2018, pp. 18–21; Pape, 2005; Paul, 2005). America's behaviour attracted widespread criticisms and led many to argue that US unipolarity was going to be replaced by a post-American multipolar world (Ikenberry, 2011, pp. 3–4; Kupchan, 2012). Though this process began before 2016, the Trump administration exacerbated these discussions (Layne, 2018). The Trump administration's 'America-first' policy – that led to the questioning of the utility of the alliances with Japan and South Korea, withdrawal from the TPP and other international agreements, and relinquishing support for multilateralism, free-trade and globalisation – challenged America's hegemonic order and ability to protect the liberal internationalist order. No other issue has contributed more to the discussion of America's decline than China's strategic rise. Though the hardening of views in Washington against China began during the Obama administration, the Trump administration persistently targeted China as the main challenger to the US and its interests. The 2017 US National Security Strategy stated that China (along with Russia) was working to 'shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests. China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor' (The White House, 2017, p. 25). Such a view led the Trump administration to replace the 'blind engagement' strategy with China, which began with President Richard Nixon in the 1970s, with a stronger foreign policy that included elements of containing China. This involved adopting adversarial positions in its economic (the most visible being the tariff war to correct America's trade imbalances with China), political (closure of the Chinese consulate in Houston and targeting of Chinese workers and students accused of espionage activities) and security (ramping up freedom of navigation missions in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait)

relations with China. Supported by a bipartisan consensus on the failure of America's peaceful foreign policy to reform China, the Biden administration continued with the hardline policy against China when it took office in January 2021. It called China America's 'most serious competitor' (The White House, 2021a).

The shift in the relative balance of power between the US and China outlined above and their assertive foreign policy approaches have the potential to unravel the US hegemonic order or even cause a hegemonic war (Allison, 2017; Friedberg, 2011; Gilpin, 1981). Either scenario would seriously disrupt the minimal peace achieved in Northeast Asia. However, this article argues that the scaffolding of minimal peace supported by the realist-liberal factors would be durable in Northeast Asia for the coming decades, but in a revised form. On the liberal side of the equation, the organising principles of liberal internationalism – economic interdependence and institutionalism – will continue to define the Northeast Asian order because of the strong support from key regional states of these principles/ideas. Contrary to the US facing a 'crisis of authority' due to both internal and external factors, the realist factor – American hegemony – would remain a critical factor of minimal peace in Northeast Asia too. This is due to three reasons: America's enduring economic and strategic advantages over China, the expanded support from the America's regional allies in preserving the US hegemonic order and China's problems in creating an alternative regional order.

American hegemony

Undoubtedly, China's strategic rise poses a robust challenge to the US preponderance at the regional level. This is not in the form of 'global balancing' (or hegemonic rivalry), but through 'local balancing', which is more conducive for China to expand its sphere of influence in East Asia (Montgomery, 2014, pp. 124–6).⁶ Despite America's vast military and technological power, Montgomery (2014) notes the following ways China has several advantages over the US: (1) China's asymmetric military strategy increases the costs of US power projection capabilities (p. 125); (2) China's A2/AD capability weakens the US strategic mobility, access to regional bases and operational effectiveness of the forces that are forward deployed in the region and beyond the Western Pacific; hence, weakening America's ability to defend its allies and protect the global commons (p. 129, 139); and (3) China status as a resident power in geographical terms, which allows for the effective deployment and mobilization of forces with greater resources in a shorter space of time to deter the US military (Montgomery, 2014, p. 126). All these points strengthened not only China's defence of its sea and air space, but also pose a credible challenge to the US military

presence and operations within the first island chain and, perhaps, even in the second island chain (Montgomery, 2014, p. 131).

Despite the challenge posed by China, the US hegemony at the global and regional levels would remain durable in the coming decades due to its enduring economic and strategic advantages over China identified by the unipolarity literature (Beckley, 2012, 2018). In economic terms, the US is still an important market and partner for investments and trade for the Northeast Asian states. According to Brooks and Wohlforth (2016), US has better long-term economic prospects compared to China despite the its showing during the 2008 global financial crisis. This is due to a range of factors, such as America's more globalised and efficient economy compared to China's high cost economy, America's ability to utilise technologies and policy measures for sustainable growth in a more efficient way compared to China, and China's domestic problems, such as demographic issues, that could hinder its economic growth (Beckley, 2018, Chapter 3; Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016, pp. 31–4, 39–45, 62–3).

The US also retains a strategic edge over China. Though China's capabilities have the potential to hurt American interests, strategy and access to its military bases in the region, the US military remains superior in terms of capability, capacity, and battle experience (Beckley, 2012, p. 75; Beckley, 2018, Chapter 4). The US maintains an edge through its dominant sea, air and space command, as well as its ability to project power (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016, pp. 15–22). It maintains a robust alliance network in the region that supports a large-scale American military presence in Japan and South Korea. The US regularly conducts military exercises with allies and partners to maintain operational readiness against any potential regional threats or conflicts. It possesses an advanced military force that is supported by high investments in defence spending and research development (Beckley, 2012, p. 75; Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016, pp. 22–31). The US ability to exercise leadership in maintaining a regional balance of power, addressing global problems and protecting the global commons, such as the freedom of navigation is second to none. States are aware of this and continue to support the resilience of the US hegemony in Northeast Asia (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016, p. 11).

There are two other factors that support the preservation of US hegemony in the coming decades, but have received little attention in the unipolarity literature. First, the durability of the US hegemony is secured by an expanded support from its regional allies in the post-2010 period. Though the American hegemony is expected to remain strong, its authority, as argued by Ikenberry (2011), has experienced relative weakening due to China's growing political, military and economic power and impact on regional affairs. The 'renegotiated' outcome, as argued here, will not see a

decline in American hegemony, as the US allies have boosted efforts to preserve American hegemony in the region. Though these states are unable to influence the outcome of the regional balance of power, US allies, nevertheless, are stakeholders who shape the regional dynamics in critical ways. The regional states, especially US allies, have pursued more activist foreign policy strategies in support of the strong American military presence in the region and maintain a resilient US hegemony (see Singh et al., 2019, pp. 29–31). For instance, the emergence of the ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP) promoted by Japan is a way to keep the US engaged in the region and counter Chinese attempts at regional dominance (MOFA & Japan, 2007). FOIP is aligned with the liberal internationalism’s organizing principles that include the promotion of economic interdependence, strengthened institutionalism and a rules-based order. Moreover, when the US withdrew from the TPP in 2017, Japan took the lead to garner support from the remaining 11 countries that led to the eventual signing of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

Second, the durability of the US-led regional order is also a result of the weaknesses related to China’s attempts to install its own alternative order (see Kai He’s paper in this special issue). China has faced resistance in its order-building attempts beyond the economic realm – externally from America’s overwhelming power and its regional allies, and internally from its own domestic challenges, such as maintaining sustainable and equitable growth across the country, aging population, environmental issues and others. As opposed to the US during the early postwar period, China does not have sufficient strategic resources and goodwill to support its order-building efforts beyond the economic domain. Any ambitious attempt to pursue order-building in political and strategic domains has been viewed in suspicious terms and countered by Northeast Asian states. A good example is how Japan countered China’s attempt to impose a narrow conception of ‘East Asia’ (made up of ASEAN, China, Japan and South Korea) on the East Asian multilateral process. With support from selected ASEAN states, Japan pushed for the incorporation of other dialogue partners, such as Australia, New Zealand and India as core members of the East Asian community and the ASEAN-led multilateral order (Terada, 2010). Suspicions from the regional states in response to Beijing’s increasingly hard-line foreign policy strategy (as seen in its tough diplomatic approach towards Hong Kong and Taiwan, its assertive policy towards its territorial disputes with Japan and several Southeast Asian states, as well as its economic coercive policies towards Australia and South Korea) have further hardened, (see Choe, 2021; *The Economist*, 2022).

At the same time, China is cognizant of the positive effects of the American hegemonic order. The US presence mitigates the Beijing’s security

dilemma concerns, such as Japan's remilitarization, and provides a stable balance of power in region critical for the growth of the Chinese economy. It is aware that the US's 'command of the commons' is so comprehensive that no other state, including China, is able to take over this role (Posen, 2003). While China's long-term objectives would be to delegitimize America's leadership in East Asia, its challenge in the short to medium term is insufficient to weaken the US hegemonic order in East Asia, including Northeast Asia.

Economic interdependence and institution-building

While the US hegemony factor experienced an adjustment, the organizing ideas/principles of liberal internationalism have remained resilient in the Northeast Asian order against trends that suggest a regional order transition since 2010. Owing to their contribution to the prosperity and development of the region and mitigating the negative effects of political and security challenges from escalating into all-out conflicts in the region, these ideas/principles were not only supported by all Northeast Asian states (except North Korea), but these have been internalised in their foreign policy strategies. This was evident when all three states remained strongly committed to globalization and open-trade, as well as multilateralism and institutionalism despite Trump administration's surrendering of American leadership in preserving the liberal internationalist order in these areas. The progress in economic interdependence and institution-building during this period is discussed as follows.

Economic interdependence

During the post-2010 period, the Northeast Asia continued on the trajectory of sustained economic development through the promotion of international trade and export-oriented strategies. Despite the occasional trading disputes that have led to the 'weaponisation' of economic relations (such as China's halting of rare earth products to Japan in 2010 and Japan's imposition of export constraints against South Korea in 2019), China, Japan, and South Korea have strengthened intra- and inter-regional economic cooperation through trade and investment policies resulting in strengthened economic interdependence. In 2012, China, Japan and South Korea (collectively making up 90 per cent of Northeast Asia's GDP (Chi, 2019)) launched negotiations on a China-Japan-Korea free-trade agreement (CJKFTA). Though the CJKFTA has yet to be signed, the three states took a positive step towards strengthening intra-regional economic cooperation and interdependence by signing a trilateral investment treaty in May 2012 (launched in May 2014). There have been other noteworthy efforts both at

sub-regional and regional levels. Within Northeast Asia, South Korea-China signed a bilateral FTA in 2015 to balance the South Korea-US FTA that came into force in 2012 and the governments in Beijing, Tokyo and Seoul have worked hard to mitigate political tensions caused by the historical antagonism from disrupting bilateral economic relations (Katz, 2013; Kim, 2021). At the regional level, Northeast Asian states have been active in signing FTAs with ASEAN states individually and collectively (such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)).

Like the previous period, China, a strong proponent of globalisation and open-trade, has played an instrumental role in strengthening economic interdependence with the rest of the Northeast Asia and East Asia. Robust export-oriented economic policies have been critical in China's strategy to support its economic, political and strategic growth. The implementation of the China's BRI under President Xi is a good example. The BRI made available large investments, through the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and Chinese banks, for infrastructure projects, such as ports, railways, roads and industrial parks to promote trade and economic development in Asia, Africa and Europe. This initiative promotes economic growth for China and its neighbours through the financing of infrastructure projects that increase inter-connectivity between Northeast Asia with other regions. Though there have been several concerns over the BRI (such as China laying a debt trap for recipient states, the lack of transparency and the project being part of China's ambitious plan to build a competitive China-led order), most states, if not all, in East Asia, have participated in this initiative. Even Japan, which was adversely sceptical of the BRI, overturned this view when Prime Minister Shinzo Abe decided to selectively participate in the initiative to gain potential economic benefits. In September 2021, China formally applied to join the CPTPP. Whether this is an attempt to disrupt American hegemonic order or a response to its own economy slowing down, Beijing's decision could also arguably be viewed as support for the promotion of open-trade and globalization.

Institutional-building

The US-China worsening competition has been a challenge to the East Asian multilateral order. The great powers, along with their allies and partners, have used multilateral platforms not only for cooperation but also to shape East Asian regionalism. Some examples include China and Japan imposing their definition of 'East Asia' to define regionalism, China stalling the ASEAN process by blocking a joint ASEAN statement at the annual summit in Cambodia in 2012, and several others. At the larger level, the US and China are engaged in either defending or imposing competing visions of regional order, namely the US- and Japan-led FOIP vision versus the China-

led vision where the BRI is the centre-piece (Singh et al., 2019). While these developments have led to the widened use of the balancing logic within the multilateral institutions, as argued by Kai He in this issue, the Northeast Asian states continue to invest in institution-building efforts both in the ASEAN-led and non-ASEAN-led platforms (Yeo, 2019).

Despite the prevailing argument that ASEAN could be marginalised by the order-building efforts by the US and China, Northeast Asian states have maintained strong support for ASEAN-led platforms, such as the APT, EAS and ARF. This has been crucial in strengthening the ASEAN-led multilateral governance of East Asia. Though China has not back down from its assertive approach (evinced by the land reclamation and militarization of islands and reefs in the Spratly and Paracel Islands beginning in 2013) and has even disrupted the ASEAN process, China's acquiescence to discuss the disputes collectively with ASEAN shows that it is willing to utilise the ASEAN process to seek pathways for a peaceful resolution of the South China Sea territorial disputes. One significant development in the post-2010 period has been Northeast Asia's engagement in the security-focused multilateral arrangements. Formed in 2010, the ADMM-Plus has been a critical platform for confidence building efforts in security terms between the armed forces and civilian defence officials of China, Japan and South Korea, as well as the US. These states engaged in annual security discussions and participate in table-top and field military exercises either collectively with the rest of the 15 members or bilaterally with ASEAN (ASEAN-China, ASEAN-US and ASEAN-Japan) (Tan, 2020). Despite the perceived weaknesses of ASEAN, the Northeast Asian states, including the US, recognise the utility of the ASEAN-led multilateral order. It is recognised as a neutral ground for all great/major powers with competing visions to engage in bilateral dialogue and contribute to regional peace and stability.

Nevertheless, the worsening US-China rivalry have led to the emergence of alternative multilateral arrangements that co-exist with extant bilateral and multilateral institutions (known as 'institutional layering') (Yeo, 2019, p. 138). The first type was the growth of informal trilateral arrangements. This is not new, as the US-Japan-South Korea (since 1999) and US-Japan-Australia (since 2002) were already part of the regional architecture. However, the post-2010 period saw an expansion of trilaterals involving Northeast Asian states, namely the US-Japan-India (since 2011) and Japan-Australia-India (since 2015). Along with the trilaterals, the period saw an acceleration of the momentum of another minilateral made up of the US, Japan, India and Australia – known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD). Japan was instrumental in both its initiation in 2007 and revival in 2017. The revival of the QSD in 2017 was given a significant boost when the four countries held their first leaders'

summit in March 2021. While these arrangements could be viewed as divisive in nature due to China's exclusion, they have become critical platforms for promoting dialogue and cooperation between the four members states and securing America's strategic presence in the region (Abe, 2012; Yeo, 2019, p. 134).

Northeast Asian regionalism remains a critical part of the East Asian multilateral architecture. While the political tensions between the member states is a challenge for trilateral integration, this process has not stalled. Spurred by the improvements of relations between China and Japan, the uncertainty caused by North Korea and the momentum set by the signing of the trilateral investment treaty, the Northeast Asian states continued to engage in the trilateral framework through a gradual, informal and low profile approach. The focus on less contentious issues, such as economics, culture, education and tourism and an aversion of controversial political and security issues have been critical for continued engagement between the three countries in this framework (Terada, 2018). Despite skipping several years (2013, 2014, 2016 and 2017), the annual summits resumed in 2018. These summits have been important in strengthening trilateral dialogue and cooperation, especially towards addressing challenges triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic and the US-China rivalry.

Conclusion

This article began on the premise that Northeast Asia has achieved minimal peace since its peaceful transition from the Cold War to post-Cold War period. The hard-earned peace is explained by a realist-liberal framework comprising of three factors – America's hegemony, strong economic interdependence between the Northeast Asian states and a stable and growing institutional structure both in Northeast Asia and in the larger East Asia. These factors maintained a stable balance of power, ensured development and prosperity, and mitigated the political and strategic tensions between the states. With the region arguably at the cusp of another transition since 2010, Northeast Asia's minimal peace is at the risk of unravelling. However, this article shows that Northeast Asia's minimal peace is durable for the coming decades. The liberal factors – economic interdependence and institution-building factors – have remained resilient in contributing to economic prosperity and development among the Northeast Asian states in the post-2010 period. Though the realist factor – the American hegemony factor – has experienced a relative weakening due to China's rise, it would also continue to serve as a determining factor of the sub-region's minimal peace, but in an adjusted manner. This is because of America's enduring relative strategic and economic advantages over China, wider support from

America's regional allies to sustain US hegemony and China's problems in building an alternative regional order.

This article makes important conceptual and empirical contributions to the study of Northeast Asian international relations. In conceptual terms, the sources of Northeast Asia's minimal peace are explained through a synthetic realist-liberal approach that analyses the effects of the realist and liberal factors separately. While the hybrid approach may lead some to question the rigorous quality of the analysis, this approach captures the complexity of Northeast Asian regional dynamics over two periods that a single theoretical approach is unable to explain (also see Paul in this special issue). In empirical terms, the article shifts the discourse on Northeast Asia away from the prevailing understanding that is defined by war and conflict by incorporating peace and peaceful change to analyse the sub-region. It identified the sources and mechanisms of the sub-region's minimal peace and how these have either remained durable or been renegotiated over the two periods. This knowledge is important for both academics and policymakers because it informs both groups where finite resources should be invested to ensure regional peace and stability and prevent a possible hegemonic war between the US and China.

There are several implications of this article's argument on Northeast Asian regional dynamics. First, a hierarchical order is a necessary condition for minimal peace in Northeast Asia. The hegemonic leader: provides a stable balance of power especially when the power indicators are superior to its regional competitors powers; mitigates the clashing interests among the multiple regional powers; prevents bilateral tensions from escalating into all out conflicts; and protects the global commons for all states in the region. The US has successfully played this role since the onset of the postwar period, and there is strong support among its allies and partners in Northeast Asia and beyond for this to continue for as long as possible.

Second, though the US hegemony in Northeast Asia remains resilient for the coming decades, the task of preserving the US-led order will become more challenging in the future. China is determined to build an alternative regional order in East Asia and beyond to reflect its preferred vision of regional order (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014). This is no surprise, as this is a critical element of a rising power's strategy to achieve security. Such efforts will not only expand China's influence and power over the region, but also inevitably weaken the US hegemonic order. To prevent this, the US must be alert to China's ambitious initiatives. To be sure, it has been responsive in terms of various policies to preserve US regional hegemony, such as the Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia' strategy, the Trump administration's 'free and open Indo-Pacific' vision, and the Biden administration's announcement of a trilateral security

pact between the US, United Kingdom and Australia (known as AUKUS) (Clinton, 2011; The White House, 2017; 2021b). To counter China's extensive investments in infrastructure financing and connectivity projects through the BRI, the US introduced the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act and the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act, as well as participated in a joint initiative with Japan and Australia known as the Blue Dot Network. Other than countering China's policies and initiatives, the US must invest in Northeast Asia's regional architecture to preserve its hegemony and interest through strengthening political and diplomatic engagement, strengthening policies that would boost economic interdependence and institution-building efforts, and strengthening the alliance network (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016, pp. 4–6; Wohlforth, 1999, pp. 8–9).

Third, Northeast Asia's minimal peace remains fragile. It is even more fragile in the post-2020 period due to the rising intensity in US-China competition and the Ukraine's crisis (Rudd, 2021, p. 58). To ensure that Northeast Asia's minimal peace remains sustainable in the long-term, a collective effort is necessary from various stakeholders. For the US, along with its allies, they have to avoid the risky strategy of promoting a divided or 'decoupled' global or regional order that is targeted at China. Instead, these states should integrate China into regional initiatives so that it benefits from the extant regional order. This is not difficult, as China has been a beneficiary of this order. The question is how to expand these benefits so that it mitigates its revisionist intentions. This is important, as isolating a revisionist state, such as China, could have detrimental consequences on Northeast Asian peace and stability as experienced by the region during Japan expansionism. China, on the other hand, has to adopt practices of a responsible great power, pursue enlightened self-interests and contribute to regional peace and stability. This would mean refraining from an assertive approach to achieve its national interests, protecting the liberal internationalist order that it has gained from and respecting the rules-based order. For America's allies, it would be critical to play a 'bridging' role to mitigate the tensions between the US and China (also see Teo's paper in this issue). This could involve creating or strengthening platforms to promote dialogue to lower tensions caused by regional strategic challenges and possibly even finding commonalities between the US-led and the Chinese-led orders. Such a collective approach is crucial to sustain the hard-earned minimal peace. The alternative is a conflict between the two powers that would result in devastating consequences for the region.

Notes

1. Northeast Asia is referred to China, Japan, North and South Korea, Russia, Taiwan and the United States (US). Though not geographically located in the region, the US is

included in the sub-region's 'security complex' because of its intertwined history with the region, vast political, economic and strategic interests and entrenched military presence in the region.

2. Others have studied peace or stability in post-Cold War East Asia (see Acharya, 2003–2004; Bitzinger & Desker, 2008; Kang & Xinru, 2018; Kivimaki 2010; Ross, 1999) and during the Sinocentric Order (see Kang, 2003, 2007; Kelly, 2012).
3. According to Mastanduno (2003), the US hegemony in East Asia was 'incomplete' because it was a 'holding action [rather] than a progressive strategy for resolving security problems' (p. 156).
4. Ikenberry (2011) offers three 'pathways' resulting from America's 'crisis of authority' – (1) a renegotiated American-led system; (2) a post-American liberal international order; and (c) system of rival spheres or blocs (see Chapter 7, p. 281, pp. 300–315).
5. Even though democracy is a critical factor in the US-led liberal internationalist framework, this factor is less relevant to Northeast Asia's minimal peace (Ikenberry, 2001, 2011, 2018; Mandelbaum, 2019). While Japan, South Korea and Taiwan are democratic states with relatively strong institutions to uphold the democratic practices, ideals and values, communist China has also contributed to the minimal peace since its economic reforms of the 1970s. Moreover, the fluctuating political tensions and weak strategic cooperation between Japan and South Korea triggered by historical antagonism further undermine the utility of the democracy factor in promoting regional peace and stability.
6. Montgomery (2014) defines 'global balancing' as efforts by '...a rising power to channel a rivalry away from its territory and challenge a hegemon in far-flung locations'; and 'local balancing' as efforts by a rising power 'to deter outside intervention in its home region and maximize its freedom of action throughout its neighbourhood, although it would not alter the structure of the international system' (p. 125).

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Wichuta Teeratanabodee for her assistance with research and preparation of the tables used in the article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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