

Leadership and Legitimacy: China and the United States in the Asia Pacific

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Introduction:

The following discussion is a very preliminary exploration of the question of what factors define and support the legitimate exercise of leadership in the Asia Pacific region. Since the end of World War II and through to the present, the United States has been the premiere power in East Asia. In the modern era, this may be changing. China, in particular, seems to be emerging as a challenge to American primacy. However, while the US has a long-established role in the region, particularly as a guarantor of regional security, China has a far more precarious position in the regional order. The chief question of this paper is what strategies is China pursuing to legitimize its power and presence in the Asia Pacific?

The answer to this question seems to be that China is addressing its social position in the region by trying to adhere to – and, indeed, promote - regional norms and values while reconstructing itself as a responsible regional citizen. China is actively trying to socialize itself to the region, with the explicit intention of convincing regional states that it is not a threat to their security and economic well-being. Given the nature of the regional order, it is unlikely that the legitimate use of Chinese power will ever extend to include military action, but regional values supposedly preclude that as a legitimate option. For the moment, China does not seem intent on altering regional norms to fit its own preferences. Indeed, its preferences seem to accord with regional norms. As a result, China has considerable potential to become a widely accepted and acknowledged member of the East Asian regional society.

By contrast, the US – to some extent, by choice- is an outsider to the region which is trying to define and alter regional norms to fit its own interests. At the same time, US power is suffering from an overall crisis of legitimacy on a global scale. This is affecting US legitimacy in East Asia, though in a manner different from most other regions. As US leadership and legitimacy in East Asia declines, China has the potential to fill this growing vacuum.

The paper is divided into three core sections. The next section describes the theoretical nature of “legitimacy”, using the English School of International Relations. The second section examines the nature and decline of American legitimacy; the third section looks at the rise of China.

Legitimacy and International Society

The concept of “legitimacy” in international relations remains deeply contested. What is legitimate action between states and how is this determined? Is there enough of an international society to make the concept of international legitimacy meaningful? Is legitimacy anything more than an international consensus, or must the concept be rooted in more fundamental international values? This discussion attempts to address some of these questions, drawing on the international society tradition of the English School of International Relations as its basis of support.

There are several forms of political legitimacy. For the purposes of this paper, we will use a sociological understanding of legitimacy, which is most appropriate to this study given its focus on international society. According to Bernstein:

Sociological conceptions of legitimacy share an attention to the society in which the rule or institution operates. Legitimacy is rooted in a collective audience’s shared belief, independent of particular observers, that “the

actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions.” (Suchman, cited in Bernstein, 14).

Clark argues that there are substantive and procedural aspects to legitimacy. The substantive aspects refer to “...values and which, or which combinations, are to be privileged at any one moment.”(Clark, 3) The procedural aspect of legitimacy “...reveals itself as a quest for *what can reasonably be accepted by international society as a tolerable consensus on which to take action.*” (Ibid. italics in original). These values and procedures can change as international society evolves; what constitutes a consensus and which actors matter in the formulation of a consensus can also change. The legitimacy of an international order is a prime determinant of its stability.

According to Clark, legitimacy is, fundamentally, a political quality that is also at the foundation of international society and conduct. Legitimacy occupies the space between three basic international norms: legality, morality and constitutionality. Legality is derived from formal ideas of law or rule; morality (justice) is derived from the substantial values of international society. As Clark states, “...the public international discourse about legitimacy has traditionally drawn freely upon both these elements...”. (Ibid., 19) However, he also argues that state conduct is often measured against “notions of constitutionality.”(Ibid.)

These arise where there are expectations created about forms of political conduct, often within political institutions...Critically, (constitutionality) is based – not upon legal or moral notions – but upon a sense of what is politically appropriate, rooted in expectations rather than in rules. (Clark, 19)

Legitimacy is not simply an expression of any of these norms or any combination of them. Rather, “(t)he practice of legitimacy describes the political negotiations amongst

the members of international society as they seek out accommodation between those seemingly absolute values, and attempt to reconcile them with a working consensus to which all can feel bound.” (Clark, 29-30).

It is possible for an act to be illegal but legitimate; it is possible for an act to be illegitimate but legal; it is possible for an action to be legal and legitimate but still immoral. In such circumstances, what constitutes legitimacy may be skewed more strongly in the direction of the other two norms. However, legitimacy is not determined by the legality, morality or constitutionality of any single situation. Moreover, without a consensus, an act also lacks legitimacy. As Reus-Smit notes, legitimacy is an intersubjective concept. One state cannot assert that its actions are legitimate – they must be perceived and accepted as such by other states. Thus, for example, American efforts to argue that the United Nation’s legitimacy was contingent on its backing of the US war against Iraq was a declaration that the US lacked the authority to make. Likewise, American insistence that its actions were legitimate by virtue of the fact that it was the US taking the action was not a claim accepted in the international community. (Reus-Smit)

Clark argues that the norms and structures shaping international society are subject to growth and development. International society, and what constitutes legitimate action, has changed over time and continues to evolve, even as the content of the fundamental norms alters. In the modern international society, he argues that a two-tiered system has begun to develop, with membership criteria for being a full member of international society, now defined by the dominant – mostly Western- members of that society. Since the end of the Cold War and in light of the international discourse that

followed, the liberal democratic states of the industrialized world have argued that full members of the international community must meet various domestic standards, including respect for human rights, market-based economies, and other basic criteria reflective of liberal democracy. States that cannot meet these standards are not full members of the international community. They may participate in the international system, but they are on a lower rung in the international hierarchy. As such, some of these states are also, potentially, subject to interference from the full members of the system. Moreover, the right to determine what is and is not legitimate action has begun to shift, in some ways, towards coalitions of liberal democracies. Thus, as Clark points out, the consensus between liberal democracies about the need for NATO's intervention in Kosovo was sufficient, in the eyes of many states, to legitimize the action, despite the fact that it was of questionable legality.

Clark is positing what amounts to a solidarist conception of international order. He is arguing that – along with English School theorists like Nicholas Wheeler – that a true consensus around international values has developed to such a point that international society has acquired – and is, indeed, exercising – a certain authority over the domestic affairs of its members that it did not have before. One of the arguments of this paper is that this is not the case. Instead, international society remains pluralist. There is no real consensus on international values and the multifaceted, multicultural international society described and – in some ways, feared – by Hedley Bull still exists. It is true that pressure from the West over issues such as democracy and human rights has forced a change in the discourse of sovereignty over the past 17 years. Certain parts of the world have moved far more closely to the idea that certain kinds of universal

standards must be applied across the international community. All parts of the international community have had to address this argument and many developing world states have, grudgingly, paid lip service to these new standards.¹ However, these values are not deeply felt - at least not by the governments of the states in question - and, more importantly, often do not account for the very real difficulties faced by states still locked in the state-building process. There is nothing like an international consensus over these matters.

One of the important considerations here is who, exactly, is it that is accepting or not accepting the values proselytized by the West? A corollary of the argument that being a liberal democracy is a necessary condition for a state to become a full member of the international community is the idea that dictatorships or governments which do not have a mechanism by which to gain the consent of the governed lack the right to speak on behalf of their people. These governments lack domestic legitimacy. While governmental elites may not accept Western values, many elements within their populations may. The traditional understanding of Westphalian sovereignty vests state legitimacy in the government of the state in part because of the divisions that can characterize the polity. Even so, there are important signs that publics, in themselves, may be new and important actors in determining international legitimacy.²

¹ An example of this may be ASEAN's expressed intent to create a Human Rights Commission as part of its efforts to develop an ASEAN Community. The HRC will have oversight functions, but it will lack any enforcement capabilities. On the one hand, the need and demand for a HRC is an indication of how important human rights have become in the international discourse. On the other hand, the fact that the HRC will remain relatively toothless indicates the lack of consensus on its appropriate role.

² This observation is borne out by the international reaction to the Iraq War. Clark tries to argue that, in the end, the decision of the UN to give its support to the reconstruction of Iraq "bestow(ed) 'international legitimacy'" on the occupation of Iraq (Clark, 255). In fact, despite the efforts of the UN, nothing could make the American occupation of Iraq legitimate in the eyes of the publics of the international community. The essential illegitimacy of the American invasion is evidenced by the dramatic decline of the US' moral

This discussion is important for two reasons: first, part of what this paper argues is that the United States has followed policies over the past several years that have significantly delegitimized its exercise of power in the eyes of the international community. In large part, those harmful policies have revolved around the US's violation of human rights and civil liberties, the exact qualities that Clark identifies as forming the dividing line in the post-Cold War international society. This fact greatly undermines the argument for the validity of a hierarchical international society, particularly if the other liberal democracies refuse to address or are even complicit in the United States' abuse of these principles. If the leading state of the international system cannot live up to the standards that it sets for others in such an important area, then those standards can carry little weight.³

Second, the paper argues that most Asian states have never accepted that sovereignty should be redefined to include measures of legitimacy based on a state's compliance with democratic principles. One of the ways in which China has increased its standing in Asia (as well as in other parts of the developing world, such as Africa) is by championing the more traditional, Westphalian notion of sovereignty. This is a position that has great resonance in the Asia Pacific region and beyond, and also helps to alleviate regional concerns about China's long-term intentions. The building of Chinese legitimacy in Asia revolves around promoting values that limit its ability to interfere with its neighbours, thereby addressing one of their major fears about the rise of China.

standing in the world, and the inability of other governments to come to the Americans' aid in Iraq for the simple reason that, in many countries, the domestic political costs of doing so are too high.

³ Note that there is a long history of the United States believing that "American exceptionalism" applies even in the area of human rights, but there is no indication that this idea is acceptable to the larger international community. See Michael Ignatieff, *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*.

There are good reasons to believe that this traditional Westphalian approach cannot work any longer. The necessary interconnections between states, caused by the many different ways (environmental, economic, political) in which they have an impact on each other requires regional solutions and institutions. Even so, the way in which these structures will evolve will likely be shaped within the region and, in the case of Asia, China has an increasingly important role to play in that process. Working cooperatively within institutional structures may not necessarily require a significant compromise of sovereignty.⁴

As Clark points out, states seek to secure legitimation by representing their actions as being in conformity with the key principles of international society. The question that is of paramount concern in this discussion is that of how China is seeking to legitimate itself in the Asia Pacific. That is, what is China doing to makes its exercise of power and leadership appropriate and acceptable to the states of the region? It is making a clear and consistent appeal to values and practices that are common to the regional states. It is demonstrating, on a regular basis, its sensitivity to the rules and practices of the Asia Pacific, as defined by the region's established actors. In doing this, it is slowly legitimating its presence and, ultimately – perhaps – its power in the Asia Pacific. At the same time, the US is delegitimizing itself, both by undermining the values that it claims to represent and by ignoring, or treating as subordinate, the states of the region (Tay, 2002). The legitimacy of American power in the Asia Pacific is based on different factors than China's legitimacy and is far more fragile than it appears.

⁴ Here, I am understanding "sovereignty" to mean, essentially, the ability of a state to act autonomously. Robert Jackson would disagree. He would argue that sovereignty lies in the state's authority to make choices, including its right to make choices to give up autonomy. From this perspective, states that join binding institutions are actually exercising sovereignty. However, most developing world states do not understand sovereignty in this way.

The Delegitimation of American Power

In recent years, a great deal has been written about the erosion of American “soft power” within the international community. The general perception that the US has suffered a significant decline in its international standing is supported by Pew Research polling data. (PEW-SEE ALSO DATA ON CHINA). Many commentators attribute this American decline to the actions and attitudes of the Bush Administration. However, in Asia, the delegitimation of American power began with the Asian Economic Crisis.

In 1997, the Asian Economic/Financial Crisis devastated the regional economies. The reaction of the US was, at first, to ignore the problem. It failed to offer support to Thailand, where the crisis began, then later used the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to force economic concessions out of South Korea, at a time when the South Koreans were unable to resist.⁵ The US also opposed Japan’s efforts to establish a regional fund to address the crisis (in this, it was joined by China and South Korea who, initially, were more afraid of Japan’s political gains than the unfolding crisis). The US backed and even dictated the policies of the IMF and was widely perceived as using the crisis to force economic reforms in the region that would work to the benefit of American business interests. When it became apparent that the IMF had misdiagnosed the Asian Crisis and was following the wrong policies, regional states began to question the legitimacy of its expertise –and, by extension, that of the US. In addition to these factors, there was a notable element of American triumphalism, as many American commentators and

⁵ Note that the reaction of South Koreans to the IMF was complex. Many in SK civil society welcomed IMF intervention as a way to break the political and economic power of the chaebols. Later, however, nationalist reactions against the IMF took hold and today, many South Koreans feel that their country’s economy has been colonized by outsiders.

economic officials blamed the crisis on misguided Asian economic models and used the opportunity to crow about both the superiority and inevitability of the “Anglo-American model” of economic development.⁶By the time the crisis rolled to an end, the US was perceived in many parts of East Asia as a predatory power that was both an unreliable ally and the author of the systemic global financial instability that had created the crisis. By contrast, China, which had avoided devaluing its currency during the height of the crisis and had offered financial aid to Thailand, was perceived in the region as a responsible power.

With this background, the coming of the Bush Administration in 2000 and, in particular, the events leading up to and following the American Invasion of Iraq, has done a great deal to delegitimize the United States’ standing in the Asia Pacific. On the surface, this may not appear to be the case. The region was, in fact, seriously divided over how to respond to the American action, with several regional state governments – including, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and South Korea – agreeing to send support personnel to Iraq. Other states were vehemently opposed to the invasion. Indonesia and Malaysia, the two most prominent Muslim states in the region, were the strongest voices of opposition. Vietnam, too, opposed the American action, given its own history with US intervention. At the same time, security relations between the Asian states and the US have actually increased and improved. Malaysia, for example, has strengthened its security ties with the US military, as has the Philippines. The US has declared Southeast Asia the “second front” in the “War on Terror” and acted accordingly.

⁶ Shortly after the Asian crisis, the various scandals at Worldcom, Enron and various other American companies made it clear that American capitalism was as rife with corruption, underregulation and political incompetence as anything in Asia.

Given these facts, how can it be the case that American legitimacy in the region is actually in decline? The action of Asian governments does not necessarily reflect the attitudes and opinions of their publics. This does matter. As in most of the world, Asians disapproved of the US attack on Iraq and now hold the US in much lower regard. This has meant that many governments need to be very careful in their public relationships with the US. Clearly, there is little sense here that American behaviour is “appropriate” or “acceptable.” Second, the shared values around which the US and Asian states have converged are quite different from those of the emerging, Western-oriented international society described by Clark. There can be no appeal to “moral leadership” or any of the other qualities that underpin American “soft power”. The common interests between Asia and the US lie, as they always have, in security. As we shall see, this is a fairly fragile foundation on which to build a relationship of legitimacy.

American soft power in the world has been undermined by the Iraq Invasion in a number of crucial ways. Given the importance of the consensus around shared values for legitimacy, discussed earlier, the importance of this decline must be emphasized. Long before the actual invasion of Iraq, the impending American war was remarkably unpopular among the international general public, sparking some of the largest anti-war demonstrations in history in a number of places (eg. London). Among the international public, there was the perception that the US was embarking on an illegitimate war of aggression and choice against a country that posed minimal threat to international security. Information that has come out since that time has largely confirmed the perception that, for political reasons, the American Administration wanted a war with Iraq and was prepared to ignore or even alter intelligence to get it. The US failure to

secure the support for the war from the UN Security Council only added to the overall impression of illegitimacy. The general effect of the invasion was to compromise the foundations of international law and introduce the possibility that, in the future, powerful states will launch pre-emptive wars against other states which they claim – however implausibly – to pose security threats. Since the initial invasion, the remarkable incompetence with which the Americans have prosecuted their occupation of Iraq has only added to the decline in American legitimacy and the positive image of the US in the larger international community.

The greatest damage done by the Iraq War to American legitimacy, however, may be in the area of human rights. As Clark notes, the international society that was evolving in the post-CW era was gradually grappling with the question of limitations on state sovereignty based on criteria such as democracy and respect for human rights. American actions since 2001 have undermined all of this development and rendered grossly hypocritical Western efforts to expand these ideas into the larger international community. The US has explicitly adopted torture as a state policy. The practice of “rendition”, or deporting people suspected of terrorist links to third countries where they will be tortured, has become commonplace. The use of CIA “black prisons” is another example of civil rights being set aside by the US. The revelation of torture carried out at Abu Ghraib prison, and the subsequent efforts by the American government and military to sweep the entire issue under the table have not gone unnoticed. (See NYT editorial).⁷

⁷ In the case of Abu Ghraib, only low-level functionaries involved in the torture were punished. Other, higher ranking officers were acquitted and investigations into the abuse were carefully circumscribed to prevent moving up the chain of command to see where the orders to torture originated. In fact, as detailed by Seymour Hersh, the political and legal justifications for tortures originated at the highest levels of the US administration. Seymour Hersh, Chain of Command.

The prison camp at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba remains a legal and moral black hole, further eroding American moral standing.

Along the way, the American Congress has done much to accommodate these abuses of human rights, making the entire American political system complicit in something that, according to the human rights advocates of the 1990s, should not be done by “civilized states.” The abuse of power in the White House, through such actions as illegal wire-tapping of the American population, and the inability of the American political system to deal with these obvious abuses, has further undermined the authority of American political ideals. Even the decision by the American electorate to re-elect George Bush in 2004 is widely perceived in the international community as a failure of American democracy. The complicity of the American media in promoting and sustaining the Iraq War is a demonstration of the bankruptcy of the concept that a “free press” can act as a check on governmental abuse. The selective way in which the US has promoted the development of “democracy” in the international community, and particularly in the Middle East, is also a problem. American political and material assistance to Israel, during its war with Hezbollah in summer 2006, is instructive. Lebanon is a functioning democracy, but this did not sway the Americans to use their influence to halt the Israeli actions. In addition, the West’s refusal to recognize the democratically-elected Hamas in the Palestinian Territories underlined the highly selective application of democratic principles.

It is important to note that the US and other Western states have not abandoned the effort to make human rights a decisive factor by which to confer full membership in the international community. It is just that they lack any credibility in doing so when the

US is so blatantly violating these standards. When states that have much more serious internal security problems than the US decide to use coercive and abusive tactics against regime opponents in order to maintain themselves, the criticism and self-appointed authority of Western states rings very hollow. The fact that the American invasion of Iraq was eventually justified, in part, on human rights grounds has done considerable damage to the legitimacy of the human rights movement in this respect. The charge, made by many in the developing world, that humanitarian intervention would be abused by powerful states pursuing other ends, was proven to be correct (AYOOB).

The American presence in East Asia is based upon security needs, rather than shared values, and this makes for a fairly fragile legitimacy. The United States does have a certain level of authority in East Asia and it is expected to act to balance the regional distribution of power. But its range of appropriate action is limited and will grow more limited as China becomes an increasingly important actor.

Katzenstein argues that the world is divided into regions created and situated within an “American imperium”. In both Europe and Asia, the US allied itself the dominant states which act, essentially, as agents of American power in their respective regions. In Asia, this dominant state is Japan. However, Katzenstein may be mistaken. Japan is certainly a powerful economic actor in the Asia Pacific, and it is definitely perceived as being an adjunct to American power. However, Japan has relatively little authority in the region, due to its unresolved history with the rest of Asia and its subservient role to the US. Even Japan is not certain of its Asian identity. Many Japanese see themselves as having more in common with the other functioning democracies of the developed world than the struggling, authoritarian regimes common in Asia. In short, the

American standing is based around a sense of threat. If that threat were gone or seriously alleviated, there would be little reason for the US to stay.

There is also a powerful racial/cultural dimension to US involvement in the Asia Pacific that compromises American regional legitimacy. As Hemmer and Katzenstein note, the major reason that there is “No NATO In Asia” is because the US did not feel that it shared a sense of collective identity with Asian states. After WWII, when the US was shaping its imperium, Americans regarded Asians as being racially and culturally inferior and had no desire to construct larger, multilateral frameworks from which to shape regional relations. As David Capie points out, Australia, in particular, was reluctant to participate in multilateral structures that would include racially inferior Asians. By contrast, the American approach to Europe was shaped by the belief that Europeans were the equal of Americans, part of a shared Western civilization and cultural values that merited respect and consideration. This factor cannot be overlooked and still plays a significant role in international interactions today, again most prominently seen in the West’s dealings with the countries of the Middle East. This racial component is not the only factor accounting for the American preference for bilateral security relationships in Asia, but it is the most important. This sense of a cultural gulf underlines the extent to which the US and Asia are divided. It is true that the values of democracy and human rights that the US claims to represent do have a broad appeal within Asian publics. However, the US is no longer in any position to credibly represent these values (assuming that it ever was) and the other values that it has supported – i.e., those of security and market economies – have sometimes compromised the democratic development of Asian states.

The Rise of China

The rise of China's "soft power" in the AP region must be seen in conjunction with the decline of American influence. The one feeds the other. It is likely that China's rise would have happened even without the American retreat, but it has not, and the dynamic of the American situation has provided China with numerous opportunities to further its own interests and reform its regional and global image as a direct and deliberate counterpoint to the American approach. This has enhanced the appeal of China's message.

During the Cold War era, China was usually a problem for the countries of the Asia Pacific. It gained a reputation as determining its foreign policy on the basis of ideology rather than pragmatism and it was a supporter of communist insurgencies throughout Southeast Asia. In the 1970s, China became an ally of the US in its efforts to contain the Soviet Union and its allies, but the Communist state was still regarded by some Asian states (notably Indonesia and Malaysia) as a long-term threat to the region. China's diplomatic and economic approach to the region began to change in the 1980s, as the Chinese communists began their pursuit of capitalist economic development, but the diplomatic shift in tone became most pronounced in the aftermath of the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997. As already noted, China's actions at that time were perceived by Asian states as the behaviour of a responsible and sensitive great power, in marked contrast to the US. China was pleasantly surprised to discover the success of its diplomatic decisions and, since that time, has worked out and mastered a sophisticated regional (and global) diplomacy that has done a great deal to reform China's regional image and alleviate –

though certainly not lay to rest - many local concerns about China's long-term goals and intentions.

The most overt sign of the shift in China's foreign policy is its support for, and advocacy of, regional multilateral institutions (again, in marked contrast to the traditional American position). In the past, China had avoided involvement in multilateral institutions, believing that its bargaining power was enhanced in bilateral arrangements and that it risked being colluded against within larger structures. After the crisis, however, China came to the realization that multilateral fora provided it with an opportunity to demonstrate its responsible regional citizenship. Many of the institutional developments in the AP since the end of the crisis have been driven by China, and all include China as a major player.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its member state have been courted assiduously by Chinese diplomats. China has strongly supported ASEAN's primary role in many of the regional institutions, even in the face of opposition from other powerful states. For example, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Asia's only region-wide security regime, is still dominated by ASEAN, which insists on maintaining its primary role. Many participant states, such as the US and Australia, are frustrated with the glacial pace of the ARF's progress and the informal nature of the ARF's structure. However, ASEAN has managed to defend its methods and maintain its prominent role mostly because of China. China supports ASEAN's role and approach in the ARF and ASEAN, in turn, can argue that China remains in the ARF because of the ASEAN way. China supports ASEAN because it is genuinely to its advantage to keep the ARF consensus-drive and non-binding. But it also recognizes that the respect that it shows for

ASEAN's methods and status allow it to earn much-needed regard and standing with the smaller countries that may, eventually, look to China for regional leadership.

China recognizes that it has to overcome many obstacles, most of which are not faced by the US, if it wishes to become trusted and accepted in the Asia Pacific. Its history of being a disruptive influence in East Asia must be overcome. It must deal with the pressing concern that its geographical proximity and sheer size mean that it will eventually become the preeminent power in the region and then will use that power to dominate its neighbours. That fear keeps Asian states holding on to the American security blanket. China must also contend with the concern that the rise of the Chinese economy will, inevitably, be at the expense of the smaller states of the region which will find themselves outcompeted by Chinese goods in the markets of the industrialized world. Finally, some of the major non-traditional security concerns in Asia – most notably environmental degradation – are most prominent in China and will have regional consequences if they are not faced in a timely manner.

China has tried to face these concerns by insisting that it will not be a hegemonic power, should it ever have the opportunity, and offering a version of Chinese history that purports to prove that China has never sought hegemony in the region. Even if this is an accurate interpretation of China's history, however, the past may be poor guide for the future, given the unprecedented nature of China's rise and the reality that a large power seeking to maintain astronomical economic growth rates, cannot help but acquire substantial interests in every part of the world. Still, China is trying to address regional fears of its rise by allowing itself to be socialized into regional norms. At the same time, it promotes a vision of international society that strikes a chord with the leaders of the

regional states (and beyond) and is far more appealing than the aggressive redefinition of international society that the West has tried to promote since the end of the Cold War. China also offers to the world an alternative approach to economic development, the so-called “Beijing Consensus.” REFERENCES AND EXPLANATION.

The “Beijing Consensus” is probably not applicable outside of China, except in very broad terms. But the fact that there is a supposed alternative to the “Washington Consensus” is extremely appealing to Asian states that remember the Economic Crisis, as well as Latin American states that have been in full rebellion against Washington-backed “globalization”.

China has tried to address these concerns in turn. Asian states are still very leery of a rising China and remain concerned about such outstanding issues as the tensions over sovereignty in the South China Sea. They remain insistent on maintaining their security ties with the US in order to keep an American counterweight in the region.⁸ This perception is based on a sense of threat, caused by China’s geographical proximity. However, over the past 10 years, China has made enormous strides in reforming its image in the eyes of most Asian countries. China has made a strategic decision to be a good neighbour. The Chinese argument is straightforward: China’s political stability and, perhaps, survival as a state depends on continued economic growth which, in turn, depends on having good relations with its neighbouring states. Economic development would surely be threatened if the region were wracked by instability. Thus, from a purely self-interested point of view, China has every reason to maintain good relations. But

⁸ The concern over China and the South China Sea is particularly acute in the Philippines, one of the claimants to reefs in the Spratly Islands and the ASEAN member that has been most in conflict with China over the region in recent years. However, while the Filipinos hope that the Americans can act as a check on China in this area, the US has made it clear that it has no intentions of becoming involved in the Spratlys disputes.

China also insists that it does not have hegemonic ambitions and that regional states will not need to worry about a domineering China even when the country reaches its full potential.

For the most part, China's strategy seems to be working. Most Asian states are now far less concerned with a bullying China than they were just 10 years ago and, so long as China maintains its "charm offensive", anxiety about China will continue to decline. It may take another generation or two, but China may eventually be accepted in the region as a minimal threat. Then, the US will find itself in a difficult position. As it is, the present situation greatly limits what the US can do. Asians may want the US in the Pacific to act as a check on China and to fulfill the traditional American role as security guarantor.⁹ But this does not mean that they will join an American-backed alliance against China (which the US is, reportedly, trying to form with Japan, Australia and India) or that they want the US antagonizing the Chinese. Even as the US constrains China, China is constraining the US through no more than being friendly and respectful of its neighbours. (NOTE MEKONG DELTA CONFLICTS)

China has tried to deal with the regional concerns about the economic impact of China's rise by insisting that "a rising tide raises all boats". China's economic success can be a boon to the rest of the region. So far, China is running a significant trade deficit with the ASEAN states and China-ASEAN trade has grown steadily for the past 7 years, hitting a new record of \$169 billion US in 2006. It is expected to hit \$200 billion by 2010. China itself initiated the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area, arguing that this was

⁹ Note, however, that this role is no longer as clear as it once was. The American regional role was possible because the US was seen as an outside power, acting as a check on Japan, and without regional aspirations of its own. The infusion of the "War on Terror" into Southeast Asia has altered the nature of US interests in the region, and the US is now encouraging Japan to re-arm, albeit under American auspices. Finally, many in the region perceive Washington as having mismanaged the North Korean situation. REFERENCES.

the best way to ensure that the benefits of China's economic development would be spread around the region. The ACFTA also carries special provisions to allow the less-developed ASEAN states more time to open their markets to Chinese goods. In the long-run, the ACFTA may still not be enough to prevent China from sucking jobs and investment away from ASEAN. In this scenario, the success of the ASEAN states largely depends upon them finding niche markets in China, or using their Chinese-fuelled economic success to spread to other markets. Also, rising wages in China hold out the hope that the Chinese skilled labour market in some areas may soon out price itself in relation to many of its neighbours. How all of this will play out remains to be seen. What is important for now is to note that China's overtures to ASEAN are largely political, designed to address regional fears, and mostly successful. China's pro-active initiatives have also forced countries like Japan and South Korea to pursue their own FTAs with ASEAN, in the hope of keeping up with China.

China's rise has created many internal problems that will have massive regional consequences. The most obvious area of concern is environmental degradation. China has created its "economic miracle" at the cost of its environment and massive social unrest and dislocation. These are domestic problems that can lead to political instability within China and have direct effects on the larger region. Dealing with some of these issues may require a regional response, something that it will be very difficult for China to accept, particularly given its focus on the sanctity of state sovereignty. Nonetheless, its advances in regional diplomacy – and, by extension, its own developmental plans – will certainly be at stake if its internal activities have negative regional consequences.

China offers a version of international society to the states of East Asia that most of them – at least at the elite level – find far more appealing than the vision proffered by the West. In fact, China supports the traditional Westphalian principles of international order. The traditional approach places sovereignty at the top of any list of international obligations and understandings. Not surprisingly, ASEAN also places sovereignty at the core of its regional relations. In recent years, ASEAN has begun to debate the efficacy of its principle of non-interference, especially as the domestic actions of member states have had region-wide consequences. This was apparent during the Asian crisis, when economic collapse in Thailand had a contagion effect. Even so, ASEAN has proven incapable of altering this fundamental principle. The member states value their sovereignty too much.

China has attempted to put its principled approach to sovereignty and international relations into practice around the world. China has attracted considerable attention in recent years over its growing presence in Africa. Many Western commentators, drawing on the “Western” model of international relations, have criticized China for doing business with brutal African regimes. But China’s actions are consistent with its own principles. China has decided that it will not interfere in the affairs of other states and is determined to recognize the established governments of different states as the legitimate sources of national authority. It is debatable that China can continue to practice such a strict application of non-interference in its relations with other states, especially if its national interests require stability in some of the states with which it is dealing. However, China’s ability to intervene in other states’ affairs is also tempered by the fact that it can only establish its legitimacy in East Asia by demonstrating that it is as

respectful of state sovereignty as it claims. Over time, China may find that its ability to affect its global partners can be facilitated through quiet diplomacy, rather than the kind of overt intervention that has characterized Western interactions with the developing world.

China has to its advantage the fact that it is a developing world state dealing with other states which are also part of that same world. These countries share, in a general sense, similar problems of economic and social development. In contrast to Western states, which seek to impose standards and set criteria for others to meet, China offers a non-judgmental, legally consistent approach to global relations.

None of this suggests that this approach will legitimize China's leadership in the Asia Pacific or beyond. However, the creation of Chinese legitimacy and, eventually, leadership is a gradual process that first requires that China be seen as part of the regional society. In contrast, the US, particularly since the terrorist attacks on 9-11, has established a relationship of "primacy" with the states of Southeast Asia, expecting these countries to fall into line behind it and pursuing policies which few of the regional states find to be productive (Tay). By showing respect for regional states, by agreeing to obey the rules of regional interaction as established by ASEAN, and by restraining its own behaviour, China has advanced its standing in Asia.

There are very strong indications that China's strategy – what Kurlantzick has referred to its "charm offensive" – is paying off. China has not been entirely passive. It has financed Chinese language and cultural centres around the world. Its new diplomats are sophisticated, fluent in local languages, and media savvy. As a sign of China's new standing in Southeast Asia, Chinese culture is being celebrated and accepted as never

before. Local ethnic Chinese communities, and even national politicians, are playing up their ethnic Chinese connections. All of this has the potential to backfire, of course. The next crisis could reignite the flames of anti-Chinese sentiment that rocked the region almost a decade ago. But, for now, China's efforts to present a positive image of itself to the Asia Pacific region seem to be bearing fruit.

Leadership and Legitimacy

Ultimately, China's legitimacy – the question of what would be appropriate Chinese action within the Asian (and perhaps global) community – is fairly limited. For now, most Asian states would not consider the exercise of Chinese power – except in the most circumscribed ways – to be legitimate. China can only lead if the regional states come to it and ask it to lead. But this is exactly how China is positioning itself. It fully recognizes that establishing its legitimacy as a leader in Asia first requires laying the social groundwork that alleviates the idea that it is a real or potential regional hegemon. The values of sovereignty and autonomy that underpin regional relations in Asia are fundamentally opposed to the idea of hegemony. But there is a difference between being a regional hegemon and being a regional leader. China has argued that its historical presence in East Asia was that of regional protector, the “big brother” to the smaller states of the region. There are some indications that a similar idea may be at work today and may be in the process of becoming a reality simply by virtue of the power China is gaining as its economy grows. David Kang has suggested that Asian states may be willing to adapt to a hierarchical system, with China at the top. Acharya disagrees, arguing that Asian states are too committed to their own autonomy, particularly after the

experience of colonialism, to willingly submit to a subordinate relationship with another power. Acharya is probably correct, but this China may still emerge as a leader in Asia by playing a very subtle diplomatic game. For the exercise of China's power to be legitimate, it needs to quiet regional fears of it as a security and economic threat, respond generously and respectfully to regional states when they face crises and other difficulties in the future, then gradually establish its credentials as a reliable and responsible regional citizen. Eventually, Asian states will come to see China as a leader by virtue of its power and self-restraint. The scope of China's legitimate actions may be quite limited – for example, it is doubtful that local states will ever perceive China's use of military power in the region as legitimate – but China may not need to push the bounds of legitimacy so far. Moreover, a single breach of legitimacy does not necessarily render all of state's actions illegitimate.

By comparison, the range of legitimate American action in the Asia Pacific is far greater than that of China. This is because most regional states know and accept the US as the regional security guarantor which, ostensibly, grants it the right to use a certain level of military force. Still, outside of the issues of North Korea and Taiwan, it is hard to see where American military power could be legitimately employed. Even in these two cases, how the US manages these hotspots is important, as demonstrated by recent disagreements and tensions between the US and South Korea over American relations with North Korea. In other areas where some regional states might actually want the US to be militarily active – notably the South China Sea – the US has indicated that it will not become involved. The US claims that its presence is necessary to maintain freedom of the sealanes in Southeast Asia, but this task can certainly be handled by local states.

Other than its security role, there is little underpinning American legitimacy in the Asia Pacific. The foundation of shared values between the US and Asia is relatively weak and important elements of that relationship have been undermined by the erosion of American “soft power”, particularly in the area of human rights. Growing American military involvement in various parts of Southeast Asia may have strengthened shared interests government to government and military to military but, by undermining or dismissing human rights concerns, they have also had the effect of strengthening the pluralistic conception of international society advocated and supported by China.

One of the difficulties that the US faces in the Asia Pacific is that it is used to being a regional hegemon. The US has great difficulty in following the lead of other states or in appreciating the perspectives of weaker states. China has recognized that its future leadership lies in convincing other states to follow it, while the US assumes that its leadership, based in ideas of American exceptionalism, is both natural and acceptable to other states. This will not always be the case, but the US seems to have little capacity to change in this respect.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the legitimacy of an actor’s actions is an inherently social phenomenon. Thus, understanding what is legitimate means understanding the nature and structure of the society of which that actor is a part. International society is highly complex and, as this paper has argued, remains a predominantly pluralist structure, albeit with some indications of solidarist inclinations. East Asia is a region that has defined itself as adhering to traditional Westphalian notions of the state and sovereignty. China

strongly supports this approach and has found that it may be able to fit into the regional society if it can address and alleviate uncertainties about its power and intentions. By contrast, the United States, despite its long history in the region, has never been part of the region. Recent American actions have done a great deal towards delegitimizing the exercise of American power. This has had the effect of undermining the solidarist project in East Asia and creating further openings for Chinese influence.