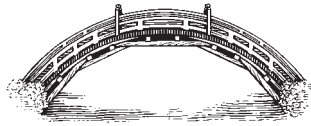


SPECIAL ESSAY

Reading the New Era in Asia: The Use of History and Culture in the Making of Foreign Policy

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The year 1989 was one of the great turning points in modern history. One international system came to an abrupt and surprising end and a new one was in the making. Rarely in history had the components of world order changed so abruptly. Almost no one foresaw the sudden end of the Cold War system. The end of the bipolar era meant that the international system was suddenly without a fixed structure and was subject to rapidly changing conditions. The end of the Cold War in particular opened a new era for Asia. The center of gravity of the global economy was shifting from the North Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific region. A region that had been a colonial backwater when the Cold War began was now the emerging new center of world power and influence. After being dominated by the Eurocentric world throughout the modern era, Asia began to come into its own—increasingly subject to its own internally generated dynamics. For the first time in modern history, Asian nations acquired the power to adopt active roles in the international system and to shape their regional order. Asia in the post-Cold War era is in a kind of interregnum, however, lacking a fixed regional structure or a recognized legitimate order to cope with its diverse cultural and political systems, and having vast differences of wealth and population, competition for energy resources, arms races, border disputes, conflicting historical legacies, rampant nationalisms, and limited experience with multilateral organizations.

This highly complex new reality in Asia came at a time when the study of international relations was achieving a new level of sophistication and could therefore provide analytic tools to apply to this complex region. The attempt to establish a science of international relations—the systematic study of patterns of conflict and cooperation among nations—is of relatively recent origin. It was in the post-World War II United States that the discipline of international relations flowered. Drawing inspiration from émigré scholars like Morgenthau, Wolfers, Deutsch, and the young Kissinger and Brzezinski, the discipline became, as Stanley Hoffman observed, a quintessentially American social science. Born and raised in the United States, the discipline of international relations grew up in the shadow of the immense U.S. role in world affairs. The new discipline focused its attention on the study of order in international society. “How states create and maintain order in a world of sovereign powers,” Hoffman wrote in 1977, “has been the fundamental and so far insoluble problem of international relations.”¹ In the time since the early postwar period a rich and burgeoning body of theory on the

¹ Stanley Hoffman, “An American Social Science: International Relations,” *Daedalus* 106, no. 3 (Summer 1977): 41–60.

problem of international order has grown, replete with its own controversies and competing theories on how it is devised, why it breaks down, and how it is reestablished. The study of great power transitions is one of the most thoughtfully considered aspects of international relations theory; and in Asia, we confront the rise of the world's two new great powers, China and India.

Theoretical sophistication, however, has brought anything but consensus. For example, Aaron Friedberg has recently described six different theoretical perspectives on what the rise of China may mean for both U.S.-China relations and regional stability.² The historian John Lewis Gaddis, for one, has been highly critical of the scientific claims of international relations theory. He observes that

the efforts theorists have made to create a 'science' of politics that would forecast the future course of world events have produced strikingly unimpressive results: none of the...approaches to theory...that have evolved since 1945 came anywhere close to anticipating how the Cold War would end... If their forecasts failed so completely to anticipate so large an event as that conflict's termination, then one has to wonder about the theories upon which they were based.³

Gaddis quoted approvingly a wry remark made by the distinguished historian of the Soviet Union, Robert Conquest. When once asked what lesson people might learn from the surprise ending of the Cold War, Conquest replied: "If you are a student, switch from political science to history."⁴ Nevertheless, whatever its limitations in anticipating the future, the field at its best provides us with perspectives and conceptual tools to apply to our thinking about the complex reality of the new era in Asia. *Asia Policy* can draw upon what international relations theorists tell us about patterns of state behavior extending across time and space. Theory can sharpen the kinds of questions we should be asking about the objective conditions that we are dealing with.

We now have the benefit of a very highly developed range of expertise on Asian societies that simply did not exist a generation ago. Over the last generation there has developed in the United States—thanks to a combination of foundation and government support—a very substantial infrastructure of Asian studies. This is a remarkable chapter in American higher education.

² Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?" *International Security* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 7–45.

³ John Lewis Gaddis, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," *International Security* 17, no. 3 (Winter 1992–93): 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

When the United States first became entangled in Vietnam in the 1960s, no American had studied the history of that country through native sources.⁵ While there were at that time a respectable number of specialists studying Russia, China, and Japan, their work was still at an early stage. Serious study of Korea was only beginning in the 1970s.

By the 1990s the number of Asia specialists with language competence and first-hand knowledge of the countries of this region had greatly expanded. It was the existence of this area studies expertise, scattered around the country and beyond, that Senator Henry M. Jackson had discussed with me in the 1970s as a necessary ingredient in the policy process. Jackson believed that there was a strong need for developing a better informed American foreign policy toward Asia. He was particularly influenced by his belief that the American failure to understand the Sino-Soviet split had resulted from the absence of expertise on China in government. Jackson, who had helped bring down Senator Joseph McCarthy, blamed McCarthy for driving expertise on China out of the State Department.⁶

The growth of area studies provided the possibility of giving U.S. policymakers an understanding of the sources of the international behavior of Asian countries—something U.S. policymakers had often lacked at very critical times. One thinks about how we have often misperceived and underestimated Japan—except for the 1980s when we overestimated Japan.

If, for example, U.S. policymakers had understood Japanese history and culture better in 1941, they might not have been so confident in the effectiveness of the oil embargo to change Japanese behavior. In the autumn of 1941 the U.S. Navy was anxious to avoid conflict with Japan in order to allow time both for the Navy's crash shipbuilding program to achieve its buildup sometime in 1942 and for the fortification of the Philippines. But the State Department was confident that it could bring pressure to bear on Japan and still avoid conflict during the time period the Navy said was essential for this buildup. Stanley Hornbeck, the State Department's principal architect of policy toward Japan, was contemptuous of the Japanese capacity to challenge American strength. Who would think Japan would go to war against a country eight to ten times more wealthy and powerful? He dismissed the fears of a young foreign service officer by the name of John Emmerson who had just returned from five years

⁵ See Ernest R. May, *Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

⁶ See Kenneth B. Pyle, "Henry Jackson and the University of Washington's Jackson School of International Studies: A Personal Reflection," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (Winter 2005/2006): 3–10.