CHAPTER 9

The 2010s: Asia’s Slide toward Conflict and IR Theory

Gilbert Rozman

Whereas in the 1970s–1980s there was great hesitation to review theories validated as befitting the Cold War and in the 1990s–2000s a limited set of theoretical revisions cautiously reflected overall confidence in Asian developments, IR theories faced new skepticism in the 2010s amid growing pessimism. Unlike the previous periods, Sino-US relations were on a collision course, North Korea was acting with near impunity, Sino-Russian relations grew much closer, as clashing efforts to reorganize Asia were advancing quickly. As the ferment intensified, IR theories lagged in interpreting its meaning. Liberal theory suffered a serious setback. Realist theory gained ground, but it faced many puzzles that only national identity perspectives seemed to explain, even if many doubted they provide the desired theoretical rigor, that is, how to make single-country analysis suitable for predictions about bilateral and other relations.

The Sino-US relationship has taken on the trappings of a new cold war. Instead of a G2 through which the resurgent superpower and the state expected to be the next superpower strive for consensus in resolving global and regional problems, a rivalry is marked by security, economic, and cultural competition of an intensity not seen among the great powers since the end of the Cold War. Summits captivate attention as did US-Soviet summits. With the United States welcoming membership in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and China pressing for a bilateral FTA with South Korea and a regional ASEAN-centered FTA, the lines were drawn for conflicting approaches to regionalism despite talk of a future FTA of the
Asia-Pacific. In parallel with the Asian quadrangle of the Cold War era: venomous Sino-Japanese rhetoric matches Sino-Soviet animosity, and upbeat US-Japanese ties of that era are echoed in claims of best-ever Sino-Russian ties now. In the spring of 2014 China made clear its plan for a security structure exclusive of the United States, using the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), an obscure entity. Earlier, Barack Obama had traveled along China’s maritime rim, reinforcing defense ties. The lines of opposition were more firmly drawn, despite several important states—India, Indonesia, and South Korea—showing reluctance to cease hedging even as they gave preference to leaning toward the United States.

Of all themes in IR theory, none was more compelling in this decade than that of a rising power, referring to China’s rapid ascent, and the response in the United States and in neighboring states. This cut across nearly all discussions about China linked to IR, whether about triangular relations, regionalism, or civilizations. Theory is concerned not only with whether a rising power and hegemonic power can avoid war, but also how other states position themselves with respect to the two powers. For the principal antagonists, questions center on which conditions lead to greater competition or cooperation. For other great powers, ideas about triangularity are being tested, whether in the case of Russia the lingering goal of a strategic triangle or in the case of Japan balance between the US alliance and a claim to be a regional leader. As in the 2000s, theories must explain the complicated course of regionalism from the East Asian Summit (EAS) as the new umbrella association encompassing all the great powers in the region to the once precarious Shanghai Corporation Organization (SCO) going from marginalization to expansionism and the moribund Six-Party Talks serving as a framework for bilateral discussions aimed at finding a path forward for North Korea. With China’s explicit civilizational challenge to the West, the impact of culture on IR theory drew increased attention.

In 2014 two clashing views drew on IR theories as well as different readings of the situation in East Asia. One view was that the region was heading to a new cold war, driven by a more aggressive China as well as by a newly belligerent Russia, both critical of the nuclear ambitions of North Korea but acquiescent to its resistance to US pressure. China’s calls for a new model of great power relations, respectful of its core interests, left the United States trying to test China and gave Japan reason to bolster its military and its US alliance, while arousing suspicions also in numerous countries that this was a screen for expansionism and a Chinese sphere of influence.