

Recognition, Deference, and Respect:
Generalizing the Lessons
of an Asymmetric Asian Order

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As many distinguished academics and officials have pointed out, the current rise of China is not a completely new phenomenon, but rather the return of China to a position of regional centrality and world economic share that were considered normal less than two hundred years ago.¹ This fact underlines the importance of history in putting the present into perspective, and at the same time, to the extent that all history is history of the present, it requires a re-evaluation of the structure of China's traditional relationships. Hitherto China's place in modern social science has been in an exotic corner, a failed oriental despotism. To be sure, traditional China did collapse, and today's China is a different China rising in a different world. We might assume that China is rising now precisely because of its differences from traditional China, that it is the last step toward the end of history rather than a resonance with the past. However, the convenience of such an assumption makes it suspect. If China is simply the latest avatar of Western modernity then it requires of the West readjustment, but not rethinking. But the only certainty about China's rise is that it is a complex phenomenon, and the convenience of constructions such as China-as-Prussia or China-as-Meiji Japan derives from their pre-emption of open-ended study rather than from their insight into complexity. To the extent that China is China, both past and present require reconsideration.

The premise of this paper is that some of the principles and practices of the East Asian international order can be generalized and used to analyze contemporary world politics. Specifically, the geo-politics of East Asia differ fundamentally from the balance-of-power presumptions of most Western theories of international relations, and both the traditional order and China's re-emergence over the past ten years have been based on a different, successful paradigm of diplomatic behavior. In contrast to the ingrained Western assumptions that greater power dominates, China has developed a practice of asymmetric international relationships based on an ideology of mutual benefit and a practice of negotiation based on acknowledgement of the autonomy of smaller partners. The management of asymmetry is particularly relevant to the post-Cold War world because it is essentially a global asymmetric system.

We can begin our analysis with one simple question. Why is East Asia less concerned about the rise of China than is the West? One possible answer is that Asia is culturally submissive, preferring the stability of a hierarchical order, while the West is more competitive. For Asia the rise of China is a return to a familiar and acceptable pattern.² The problem with a culturalist answer is that it

¹ Angus Maddison, *Chinese Economic Performance in the Long Run*, 2nd edition (Paris, OECD Development Centre, 2007).

² David Kang, "Hierarchy, Balancing, and Empirical Puzzles in Asian International Relations," *International Security* 28:3 (Winter 03-04), pp. 165-180.

downplays the tensions in China's regional relationships, as exemplified for instance in the turmoil in Korea over claims about the kingdom of Koguryo or the recent demonstrations in Vietnam protesting China's administrative incorporation of the Paracel Islands. If the rest of Asia is deferential to China only when China's behavior is acceptable, then the parameters of acceptability need to be examined.

Another answer would be that China's grand strategy is necessarily to challenge the global hegemony of the United States, and its regional strategy is simply derivative from this larger purpose.³ Until China reaches parity with the US it will avoid conflict and amass resources. Non-global powers appear less concerned because their choices are more restricted and they have little leverage with the big powers. The problem with this analysis is that it fails the test of Ockham's razor. If present motives and results of China's policy are adequate to explain and justify its actions, then the assignment of ulterior motives and long-range justifications is superfluous. China's regional "good neighbor" policies in Central and Southeast Asia have been very successful in their own right and in the present time. Who needs an ulterior motive? While such suspicions regarding China's rise might express the anxieties of the West and especially of the United States, it is unnecessary to project these concerns as China's real motivation, and it is especially misleading in explaining China's regional policy.

I have argued that China's success in Southeast Asia since 1991 was the result of skillful management of asymmetric relationships.⁴ China was sensitive to the concerns of Southeast Asian states, it showed an effective commitment to regional stability during the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and it is increasingly involved with multilateral regional institutions. It has not tried to displace or restrict the diplomatic options of its partners with other states, including the United States. As a result, even though the disparity of capacities between China and Southeast Asia continues to grow, and tensions inevitably persist, the relationship continues to thicken and to expand.

China's successful management of current asymmetric relationships resonates with its pre-modern diplomatic pattern, and it provides an important challenge to the assumption, common since Thucydides, that the strong rule when they can and the weak serve when they must. The American occupation of Iraq is only the latest in a series of failures by stronger powers to impose unilaterally their preferences on weaker countries. If domination is so difficult, why assume it to be the model of asymmetric relationships? Do differences in capacities necessarily create a dynamic disequilibrium in international relations, or can there be normal asymmetric relationships within a stable matrix of states?

These questions are especially important for the post-Cold War world. There is one superpower since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and clearly it

³ Michael Swaine and Ashley Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past, Present, Future* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2000).

⁴ Brantly Womack, "China and Southeast Asia: Asymmetry, Leadership and Normalcy," *Pacific Affairs* 76:3 (Winter 2003-4), pp. 529-548.

cannot simply get what it wants. Moreover, the unilateralism of the United States and the vagueness of its threats to others have alienated much of world opinion. If the world is not unipolar, neither is it multi-polar. There is no collection of mid-range powers that, together with the US, controls the world. There certainly are regional powers, but they operate within a world of increasingly complex interdependence.⁵ And yet differences in capacities are real, and smaller states are more exposed to the opportunities and risks of international relationships than are larger ones. For common interests to be pursued in the current multi-nodal world context, normal asymmetric relationships must be developed. Perhaps the end of the current world order will be determined by rivalry between states that consider themselves great powers, but the length and quality of international life of the current world order will be determined by the sustainability and mutual benefit of asymmetric relationships.

1. What is international asymmetry?

There is a mind-boggling diversity of states. Several have areas smaller than Walt Disney World, while the aggregate populations of the five largest are more than half the world's population.⁶ Moreover, the measurement and comparison of national capacities magnifies the complexities of international comparisons. What concerns us here is a vast midrange of asymmetric relationships in which the smaller power cannot reasonably expect to defeat the larger power in a contest of capacities, but is substantial enough so that its resistance to the larger power can frustrate the larger's attempts to impose its unilateral preferences. By this standard the American invasion of Grenada would be too extreme a disparity to count as an asymmetric relationship, while on the other end China and Japan, while different in their capacities, do not have a clear overall asymmetry. Excluded from our discussion are great wars between great powers, the usual focus of international relations theory. Among China's neighbors, its relations with Japan, Russia and India would be excluded, and arguably also its relations with Bhutan and Laos. For the United States, if we use current difficulties as a conservative guide, the forty-four states with populations larger than Iraq might be considered asymmetric partners.

There is thus a vast midrange of international relationships which cannot be contested by the smaller power nor dominated successfully by the larger. Some of these relationships, China and Vietnam for example, have existed for thousands of years. As this example suggests, however, the inability of either side to "solve" the asymmetry does not always imply peace and harmony. The interests of each political community are located within that community. Even common interests have to be accepted as such by each side rather than

⁵ Brantly Womack, "Teoría de la asimetría y poderes regionales: los casos de India, Brasil, y Sudáfrica," in Juan Tokatlian, ed., *India, Brasil y Sudáfrica: El impacto de las nuevas potencias regionales* (Buenos Aires: Libros de Zorzales, 2007), pp. 15-34.

⁶ Walt Disney World occupies 101 sq. km. China, India, EU, US, and Indonesia comprise 53 percent of the world population. Without the EU, Brazil and Pakistan must be added to reach 51 percent.

proclaimed by one or the other. Moreover, interests are dynamic and interactive. A agreement negotiated today might seem unfair tomorrow, and the potential for conflicts of interests cannot be eliminated. While conflicts of interests occur in symmetric relationships as well, asymmetry adds the frustration of the larger side that its power does not simply prevail, and the outrage of the smaller that it cannot negotiate on equal terms.

Despite the tensions inherent in asymmetric relationships, it is rare that smaller states are eliminated by larger ones. It is less rare, but still uncommon, for the defeat of the army and removal of the government of the small state to produce permanent compliance. If we consider the anti-colonial pushback of the non-Western world in the twentieth century as a response to earlier colonial impositions, then even the most spectacular cases of imperial domination by means of relative power can be questioned. The collection of tense but resilient asymmetric relations produces larger regional and global patterns that are structured by relative power but are not hierarchical. The world is perhaps best seen as a fidgety but rather stable matrix of unequal relationships, and it usually operates by negotiation, though sometimes, usually to its regret, by force.

2. Asymmetric differences: order versus boundaries

Even in a normal asymmetric relationship, disparities of power are real, and they affect fundamentally the perspectives of the participants. In every dimension of the relationship the smaller side (B) proportionally has more to gain or lose than the larger side (A). In an asymmetric relationship between neighbors, the relationship will possibly be the most important one for B, but A is likely to have more important relations with other states, and in any case has less at risk. Even an issue such as trade, where in theory equal values are voluntarily exchanged, the significance of the transaction will be proportionally greater for B. Differences of capacity produce differences of exposure in the relationship, and thus structural differences in perspective.

Because B is more at risk in the relationship, it will be more alert, more coordinated in its actions, and less complacent in either friendship or hostility. By contrast, the attention of A will be distracted by more important concerns, and so it will be generally less alert to changes in B, less coordinated in its policies, and more inclined to the view the relationship in terms of strategic climates of friendship or hostility. Because A has more important concerns, it will want to avoid recognizing problems with B, and to solve problems once they emerge. Because B is more vulnerable, it will always be alert to problems, and it is likely to see a particular settlement of a problem as a milestone in an ongoing process rather than a solution. Most fundamentally, A will be most interested in preserving an order satisfactory to itself, while B will be more interested in preserving the boundaries of its identity and interests against encroachment by A.

Perhaps the best illustration of the structural difference of interest is the traditional tribute system. What China needed from other states was deference to a general Sinitic order, not a specific gain. What Vietnam needed was the acknowledgment of the legitimacy of its rule, and the implicit guarantee that

China would not interfere. The gain or loss in the tributary transaction was incidental; the main issue was the ritual reaffirmation by each side of order and boundaries. The bottom line was mutual (but not equal) respect.

One reason why ritual was (and is) so important in asymmetric relationships is that misperception is so easy. Because A is not vulnerable, it will be tempted to bully B into accepting its solutions to disagreements. Because B is vulnerable, it will tend to exaggerate the real threat posed by A. Ultimately A might engage in what it considers a “small war” (“small” because A is not at risk from an equal opponent) in order to force the issue, while B is likely respond with desperate resistance because it sees its identity at stake. Even if the existing army and government of B are defeated, continued occupation by A is likely to generate resistance, and this will ultimately overcome A’s commitment to its more limited war aims. While Iraq is the most recent case in point, the Ming occupation of Vietnam from 1407 to 1427 provides a perfect non-modern parallel.⁷ Although B cannot do to A what A can do to B, the mortal threat posed by A justifies in B a will to resist that A, with its limited vulnerability and commitment, does not have. Usually the cost of conflict is greater for B, in both absolute and proportional terms. But it faces the alternative of continuing resistance or surrendering its identity, while A has the option of withdrawing.

3. Normal asymmetric relationships: recognition, deference, and respect

For China and Vietnam, both the Ming occupation and the hostility of 1978-1991 ended with the establishment of normal asymmetric relationships.⁸ Normalcy was founded on the knowledge, gained from bitter experience, that conflict was ineffective and costly. Moreover, Vietnam had proven to itself and China that it could defend its identity, while China had demonstrated that it was costly to do so. On this sober foundation normal relations could be built.

Each side needed different guarantees from the other. China needed reassurance that the cessation of hostility would not lead to a challenge of its international order. If Vietnam would use peace to organize Southeast Asia against China, then it would be better for China to continue to isolate Vietnam. On the other side, Vietnam needed recognition of its autonomy from China. Cessation of hostilities would mean little if China felt that it could renew the battle at will. Since China remained the greater power, Vietnam needed official recognition with its implicit promise of non-interference.

The experience of China and Vietnam can be generalized. The tradeoff in a normal asymmetric relationship is that the larger recognizes the autonomy of the smaller, while the smaller shows deference to the greater capacities of the larger. The larger would be foolish to grant autonomy without deference, and the smaller would be foolish to give deference without recognition. The principle

⁷ Some analysts consider the losing of “small wars” to be a modern phenomenon. See Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁸ For details, see Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

underlying both recognition and deference is respect. Respect does not mean friendship, especially in the early stages of normalization. In the 1990s both China and Vietnam remained alert to violations of normalcy by the other side and were quick to threaten escalation of differences. But respect is, at its root, respect for the realities of asymmetry. Neither side could expect that a return to conflict would solve its problems.

As a mature stage in an asymmetric relationship, normalcy implies that both sides are confident that common interests are more important than differences of interest, and that existing diplomatic mechanisms will be adequate for resolving disputes. Again, it should be emphasized that the differences of interest and perspective inherent in asymmetric relationships are not “solved” by normalcy. In fact, the greater relational intensity of normalcy may lead to more points of friction. However, in a normal relationship both sides assume that the relationship is more important than the differences.

4. Leadership in an asymmetric world

Even in a world of multitasking and ipods, there is an economy of attention, and attention is attracted by risk and opportunity. It follows that in an asymmetric world the larger powers will be the default attention-getters, and attention is the prerequisite of leadership. Since the actions of A are watched more closely than the actions of B, A is in the better position to influence and to coordinate.

Multilateral asymmetries magnify the concentration of attention. If A is a greater power than all of its neighbors, then it becomes a center of attention for the region. It gains the relative attention of each smaller neighbor, but in fact their aggregate capacities might exceed those of the center. Besides each bilateral differential, the communication of lesser states to the region as a whole will tend to be mediated through the center. Global powers are the ultimate focus of world attention. Much of the responsiveness, negative and positive, to the actions of global leaders is not the result of their specific threats and rewards, but is due to the fact that everyone is watching them.

While attention is a prerequisite for leadership, presumably leadership requires more. If we define leadership as the ability to coordinate compliance, then the surplus of attention enjoyed by a regional or global power poses an interesting dilemma. While in a bilateral relationship A can negotiate on the basis of its disparity with B, in a multilateral situation A might have less capacity than all the Bs put together. Of course, it can threaten all of them, or promise to reward all of them, but once A begins to commit itself to specific sanctions and rewards, then it is burning the candle of its power disparity, and the rest may not be intimidated or tempted into compliance. To approach the dilemma from another angle, if we assume that international power is the ability to get another state to do something that it would not otherwise do, and that international leadership is the habitual exercise of international power, then the dilemma is that the use of rewards and sanctions reduces the capacity for sustainable leadership.

There are two solutions to this dilemma, both observable in Chinese diplomacy. The first is to lead in directions that others would want to follow. To

the extent that the leader attempts to coordinate common goals and mutual benefits their compliance does not impose a cost, and so rewards and sanctions should be unnecessary. In such cases the disparity of capacities is not reduced, the benefit of leadership is experienced by all, and so leadership sustainability is encouraged. Of course, this requires the central state to discipline its diplomatic goals to common purposes. If the center simply maximizes its own advantage, then it will alienate the rest, and they in turn will demand rewards or risk sanctions for compliance. Of course, a central power will always attempt to color its purposes as common purposes, but the credibility of such claims does not rest with the center, but with the audience.

The second, more radical, solution is that of Lao Zi. Non-activity in leadership and acting as the lowly from a position of authority reduce the load of decisions that leadership bears and thus increases its sustainability. Of course, this solution might appear to take the pleasure out of power, just as Daoist regimens for immortality might seem to take the pleasure out of life. Perhaps a more modern variant of non-activity would be the institutionalization of international norms and procedures. Then the leader can disappear behind precedent and protocol, and leadership becomes as sustainable as the system itself. The roof is held up by architecture rather than by muscle.

While the foregoing discussion of leadership might seem related to Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power," there are two fundamental differences.⁹ First, Nye conflates attention, attractiveness and persuasiveness. People and nations can pay attention to something that is not attractive to them, and even if attractiveness is not an issue, they can fail to be persuaded to comply. The universal presence of Barbie Dolls and Big Macs did little to increase the enthusiasm of the "coalition of the willing" in Iraq. Secondly, Nye does not address the key issue in persuasion, which is shared interests. There is a fundamental difference between the ability to induce another to do something they do not want to do, and the ability to coordinate action (or inaction) for a common purpose. If "soft power" is reduced to marketing, then it is all bells and whistles, with no substance.

5. Cycles of domination and resistance

Viewing international relations through the lens of asymmetry provides a somewhat different explanation of hegemonic cycles. More importantly, it refocuses attention on the sustainability of a current international order rather than on its presumably inevitable downfall.

Western international relations theory is fascinated by cycles of economic, political and military hegemonies and their causes. Whether challengers are the product of new technologies, the military overreach of current hegemonies, the generational succession of entrepreneurs followed by their risk-avoiding, coupon-clipping offspring, or simply that the downtrodden grow strong by doing the work

⁹ Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2004). For a critique of Nye, see Brantly Womack, "Dancing Alone: A Hard Look at Soft Power," *Japan Focus* (November 2005), <http://japanfocus.org/products/details/1975>.

of their masters—these questions have an endless fascination. The problem with many cyclical theories is that they are not falsifiable because they are linear tautologies. In effect, they say that when “enough” of the specific pressure exists then the cycle will turn. If it hasn’t turned, then there is not yet enough pressure. Just wait. Cyclical theories based on generational declines do have a built-in timetable, but Ptolemaic epicycles of renewal can be thrown in to explain prolonged hegemonies.¹⁰

Asymmetry theory takes a different approach to hegemonic cycles. If an asymmetric relationship can be normal, and if such relationships are usually resilient, then it is not the inequality of capacities that generates cycles. Unequal relationships are not intrinsically out of balance. As long as A does not threaten B’s boundaries and B does not challenge A’s order, there exists an ongoing framework for the negotiation of differences. On the other hand, bilateral interactions of domination and resistance are an inherently unstable, pathological condition. The pathology is magnified in regional and global contexts because the order required by the hegemon threatens the boundaries of a larger group that is organized around the hegemon. The order is first weakened by the alienation of the peripheral states, confused and distracted by the frustration of “small wars,” and at the extreme end it can be challenged by a counter-organizing actor. Domination undermines itself by dividing the interests of large and small. The challenge of the counter-organizer will either produce a defensive re-orientation on the part of the hegemon or it will displace the old order.

If we assume that any real option will eventually occur (the “monkeys on the typewriters” hypothesis), then this is a cyclical theory. Eventually any asymmetric order will become pathological “enough” to cause a cyclical revolution. However, the focus of asymmetry theory is not on predicting the revolution, but on sustaining normal asymmetric relationships. What drives the cycle is only indirectly the result of structure. Asymmetry makes domination possible, but it does not make it inevitable. Any present order can be sustained as long as it manages the reciprocity of acknowledgement and deference. In the long run the cycle might turn, but it makes a great deal of difference to the present generation whether peace lasts another five years or another fifty.

6. Managing asymmetric relationships

Asymmetric relationships are in principle difficult to manage. The natural tendency of each side is to view the other as a reflection of itself, plus or minus resources. Hence China might view Vietnam as a small edition of itself, concerned primarily with regional and global issues and of course not really worried about China. Vietnam might view China as a gigantic Vietnam, also obsessed with its relationship to Vietnam, and thus malevolently and inscrutably acting to check Vietnam. These contrary misperceptions were clearly evident in

¹⁰ I have in mind Charles Kindleberger, *World Economic Primacy, 1500-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

1978, when China interpreted Vietnam's alliance with the Soviet Union as a strategic "sandwiching" of China, while Vietnam interpreted the border incursion as mortal attack.¹¹ Especially in times of crisis, the negative complementarity of the exasperation of A (and its consequent bullying behavior) and the paranoia of B (and its consequent desperate crisis behavior) can drive both sides further and further from the possibility of effective negotiations. However, in fact most asymmetric relationships are stable most of the time, and the reason for stability is that common sense on both sides advises against conflict as a solution to current grievances.

The task of managing asymmetric relationships can be divided into three broad categories. The first is neutralizing potential areas of contention, and the second is multilateral buffering of the bilateral relation, and the third is containing the exaggeration of frictions. Neutralization of areas of contention (territorial disputes are important examples) involves the institutionalization of negotiation and the deflection of potentially hot political issues into cold questions for experts. The prerequisite of neutralization is the formulation of the issue at hand in a fact-oriented, non zero-sum manner. Of course, such issues can be seized by politics and become reheated, but as long as they are in the hands of bilateral commissions and experts they cannot destabilize the relationship.

Multilateral buffering of bilateral asymmetries can be a form of issue neutralization or it can involve a broader framing of the relationship. An example of issue-specific buffering would be the decision of both sides in a maritime dispute to accept the Law of the Sea as the guideline for dispute resolution, or to submit a dispute to an international tribunal. This accomplishes the same purpose as issue neutralization, but the broader multinational context would be less affected by the bilateral asymmetry and hence perhaps more stable. To the extent that multilateral involvements produce a general framework for bilateral relationships there is the possibility of a general reduction in asymmetric tensions. Not only are both parties pre-committed to a larger framework of discourse and of institutions, but the specific concerns of each side are buffered. A's concern with order and deference is built into the structure of the international framework in which B is participating, and likewise B's concern for boundaries and identity is met by A's precommitment. The tensions inherent in bilateral asymmetry are framed in a larger structure that both have agreed to. A good example would be the agreement on the peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea signed by China and ASEAN in 2002.

Inevitably, however, new issues arise, and in any case an asymmetric relationship has the inherent structural tension of relative indifference and relative vulnerability. In order to contain the tendency of frictions and mutual misinterpretations from amplifying one another, there must be confidence on both sides that the basic structure of the relationship is solid. This is accomplished

¹¹ Brantly Womack, "Asymmetry and Systemic Misperception: The Cases of China, Vietnam and Cambodia during the 1970s." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 26:2 (June, 2003), pp. 91-118.

through diplomatic ritual, and here the traditional practice of Chinese diplomacy¹² and China's current attentiveness to visits of state are particularly relevant. The importance of visits of state is not that they are "summits" at which major decisions are made, but rather that they provide a general reaffirmation of the importance of the relationship and the mutual respect of the involved states. Ritual provides an outer sleeve that can contain the system-threatening implications of the inevitable confrontations over specific issues. Ritual is especially important to the smaller side, not because of the "honor" that it bestows, but because of the acknowledgement of autonomy that it provides.

Ultimately, however, the stability of most asymmetric relationships depends less on the current management or mismanagement of neutralization and ritual and more on common sense. If a relationship has been stable for a long time, it is hard to imagine that the current crisis will upend it. Incompetent diplomacy can be tolerated with the thought that "this too shall pass." If there is a common memory of conflict, then on the one hand this will remind both sides of their differences, but on the other hand it will remind them of the frustrations and costs of conflict. Normalcy does not require constant mutual satisfaction, but merely credibility and the lack of a feasible alternative.

7. Asymmetry and the problem of novelty

If experience and common sense are the most reliable foundation for normal asymmetric relationships, then novelty and political imagination provide the most dangerous ground for asymmetric conflict. It is not impossible to create new asymmetric relationships, but novelty puts the burden entirely on the conscious management of ritual and issue neutralization.

The most fundamental and difficult form of novelty is the emergence of new political identities. The splitting of India and Pakistan would be an example. The larger state is tempted to see the existence of the smaller as illegitimate, while the smaller will feel that its identity and boundaries are in constant danger. Under these conditions, the escalation of disputes is likely. In the case of a separatist movement, the harsh measures used by the central government often play an essential role in demonstrating to the community base of the separatists that there are no common interests and that independence is the only option. A good example would be the Irish independence movement, which before the brutal suppression of the Easter Uprising by the British in 1916 lacked a broad popular base.

Clearly the emergence of a Taiwanese political identity is a fundamentally complicating factor in the cross-Strait relationship, and in terms of asymmetry theory, China's policies have had a mixed record. On the one hand, China's "one country, two systems" approach and its generous policies regarding Taiwan's interactions with the mainland have encouraged a sense of the normalcy of the status quo; on the other hand, the latent threat of military action

¹² See James Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

draws a line between “us” and “them” that reinforces a separate identity. On Taiwan’s side, the lack of deference to China shown by Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian reduced the likelihood of China’s acknowledgement of autonomy. China had a justified concern that any concession to the reality of Taiwanese autonomy would not be reciprocated with deference, but rather would be used to fuel Taiwanese separatism.

New regional situations are another source of dangerous novelty. In a new regional context, states are likely to be cautious about recognition and deference because they do not want to be taken advantage of by the other side. Moreover, domestic public opinion might well demand unrealistic assertiveness vis-à-vis neighbors. There is no common sense regulating the new relationships, and in fact history can play the perverse role of recalling past glories and past injuries that make accommodation more difficult, and in fact history can play the perverse role of recalling past glories and past injuries that make accommodation more difficult in the present. The breakup of Yugoslavia provides the most graphic example. Slobodan Milosevic could make a demagogic appeal to new illusions of greatness for Serbia, to the misfortune of Serbia and its neighbors. Albanian Kosovars could, with foreign support, challenge Serbia. Meanwhile Macedonia showed deference to all, but could not overcome the unwillingness of Greece to acknowledge its identity.

China has been remarkably successful in handling new regional relationships. The most impressive example is the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its predecessor the Shanghai Five in Central Asia. The breakup of the Soviet Union and the simultaneous abandonment of communism confronted China with many new uncertainties on its sensitive Western frontier. Rather than condemning the ideological shift and isolating Xinjiang, however, China initiated security cooperation with Russia and the new Central Asian states, coupled with high-level diplomatic ritual. It is a major accomplishment to frame of regional concerns as common problems requiring cooperation rather than leave them as a tangle of domestic posturing and zero-sum games. Similarly, the fact that China was in a position to host the Six Party Talks on Korea is a tribute to its regional diplomacy.

The ultimate arena of novelty is the post-Cold War era. The importance of the global context has been amplified by economic integration, and the novelty of one superpower has been intensified by American unilateralism and unpredictability. The American cultural aversion to diplomatic ritual has been driven to new levels by the Bush II administration, and the War on Terror has reduced the continuity of American policy and hence the salience of common sense. In general, the rest of the world has been better at sustaining deference, with the exceptions of Cesar Chavez in Venezuela and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran. Given the generally low world opinion of American leadership, deference is an acknowledgement of the unique position of the US in terms of military, economic and political power and the dependence of other countries on the existing American order. It is a passive and not particularly cooperative deference.

In the current post-Cold War situation, perhaps the most important lesson of asymmetric Asian orders is that sustainable leadership is not primarily a matter of preventing the rise of challengers, but of reassuring other countries that the current order is in their interests. Key to such reassurance is that the boundaries and identities of other states will be respected, and thus that the common interests served by the order outweigh the vulnerability inherent in asymmetry. The United States is new to the tasks of unipolar leadership, and unfortunately it may be the case that every nation must learn its own lessons, from its own experience. But from the perspective of world history, the lessons are out there, and in the course of international interactions they are likely to be enforced by what Hegel called the “List der Vernunft”—the cunning of reason.