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The New Challenges we face today in East Asia

For all the talk of the nuclear programs of North Korea and the threat of terrorism we have been severely distracted from the equally serious threats that we face in East Asia which are growing daily and may well eclipse all other concerns in the years to come. The need to rethink our paradigm for security in East Asia is a pressing issue for all of us. Nevertheless, the well-established models and assumptions about what the very term "East Asia" means, based on a familiar nation-state paradigm, obscure more than they illuminate. We must put forth a new model for how individuals, organizations, societies and economies function today that takes into account the impact of economic and technological linkage, the results of a run-away consumer society, and the threat of environmental and atmospheric degradation.

We need to give serious thought to the shifts within the basic relations between individuals, corporations, states and non-government players. That does not mean that nation states have disappeared, but rather that the relationship between the elements of which they consist has been fundamentally altered. Moreover, those alterations are so profound as to be essentially invisible to most observers. If we were to create a map based upon where exactly where products are manufactured, how they are distributed and where they are consumed, it would be an accurate description of how the global economy works, but would be entirely alien to almost all observers. By the same token, the patterns by which pollution spreads through the oceans and the atmosphere, the consequences of over-fishing, the impact of climate change on agriculture and the

pressures of population growth are equally as obscure as they are critical.

The relations of the United States with East Asia are directly impacted by the shifts taking place in the social and cultural structure of this globe. Although many of the shifts born of the "death of distance" that Frances Cairncross had identified are universal, the rate of technological and social change in East Asia is far faster than in other regions. Moreover, East Asia has become the driving force in the world economy, and a critical section of the United States economy. Therefore, the gap between how relations with East Asia are perceived and their true nature is most significant in that region. The thick lattice of bilateral ties between corporations, NGOs and increasingly local and central governments has made East Asia a fundamentally different animal than it was fifteen years ago.

There is a lag in the comprehension of shifts in our world that in part results from the continuity in the observed everyday that belies the complex webs of distribution of products and the propagation of information. The streets and houses of our cities look reassuringly unchanged. But we are faced today by what can be best described as "massive integration accompanied by massive fragmentation." In effect, we find institutions and corporations across the globe consolidating and forming alliances on a scale unprecedented in human history. That trend towards integration, driven by the rapid increase technologies for the conveyance and storage of information, has overwhelmed most social, legal and economic systems for regulation. Moreover, the rapid increase in air travel and the dramatic drop in the cost of shipping which has resulted in the transportation of even minor products over immense distances, has meant that sections of local economies are now connect in a manner previously unimaginable. Banks, manufactures, media corporations, shipping companies as well as governmental and semi-governmental organizations have reached further and deeper across the globe.

But this trend is accompanied, perhaps perforce, by an equally powerful trend towards social fragmentation. Within the some countries, cities and even city blocks, we find the world divided increasingly into separate realms, often with little social interaction, or even interest, in each other. The high-rise apartments that dominate modern East Asia have created cells of isolation in what were once active close-knit communities. At the same time, the Internet has made it possible for individuals to maintain simultaneously radically different visions of the world, personal views that are not shared with those around them in daily life. Growing differences in wealth and income, or the perception thereof, have created radical divides beneath a smooth and harmonious surface. A large number of individuals throughout East Asia perceive themselves as fundamentally alienated from society.

But self-perception and the conception of society and international relations are two different matters. Local societies experience fragmentation that creates communities as distant from each other as the antipodes of the earth. At the same at the same time individuals and organizations at opposite sides of the ocean are linked together by a dense tissue of technological and cultural links. The transformation is profound, unprecedented in human history, and essentially invisible to most observers.

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The Conceptual Crisis of Asia in the 21st Century

For years the shuffling back and forth of public officials to high profile events like the APEC and the six party talks has given the impression that there are solid and contiguous entities known as "the United States," "China," and "Korea." The media and various parts of the academic world have written extensively about a world of technological transformations in our age, and the rapid expansion of trade and travel. Yet most hesitate to address the fundamental alteration of the nation state implied by those changes. Yet as powerful as the rituals of press conferences and formal state visits may be, the transformation whereby traditional states have decayed and been replaced by a network of international interest groups cannot be entirely obscured. The next step in the study of international relations will be to clearly identify, limn and name accurately the players that control the exchange of commodities, funds information and concepts

In a nutshell, we see a web of NGOs, corporations, banks, personal and financial networks and organized crime syndicates that cooperate and bargain beyond the domestic vernacular discourse of each nation state. Thus, a domestic discourse is maintained that preserves the traditional ideology of the nation at the same time that these new groups aggressively assert themselves. The challenge for us is that the profoundly destabilizing aspect of this new power configuration cannot be reduced to globalization itself. Although there are clearly factions who use globalization for their own selfish purposes through outsourcing and the destruction of local economies by dint of saturation with cheap products, globalization is ultimately a neutral phenomenon in itself whose ultimate impact remains a great unknown. Rather the biggest issue is the absence of a conceptual map for average citizens to understand the new patterns through which goods and information are distributed and the new hierarchy of political and economic players that determine how policies. There is an awareness of the invisible

powers that shape our world, but because the conceptual framework for understanding them is absent, profound insecurity grasps East Asia and makes it far easier for politicians and demagogues to manipulate the population.

The economies of Korea, China, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand Mongolia and the United States are being woven together far more quickly at the economic level than the sinews of institutional cooperation or cultural unity are forming. I treated this phenomenon in a recent essay on Sino-American relations:

> "This merger of the United States and China takes the form of distribution systems and computer-based business networks that graft together hugger-mugger the tissue of two profoundly different societies. This new creature cannot understand its own heterogeneous nature, let alone decide which direction it wishes to pursue. Transnational corporations such as Wal-Mart sew together the two countries through logistics and distribution: A largely opaque world of factories, loading docks, shipping lines, trains, trucks, and warehouses that support a supply network permeating both countries. A transfer point for containers (or isotainers) owned by such unfamiliar giants of the U.S.-China economic system as China Shipping Container Lines in Ohio has more in common with similar facilities in China than it does with the surrounding Midwest community."[1]

As Julian Delasantellis has explained, "globalization's true avatar is now the containerized shipping unit, those standard 20-to-40-foot rectangular cargo boxes that are seamlessly transferred from oceangoing ships to inland transit"[2] and yet the impact of such trade patterns, and the dependency on cheap products that Delasantellis suggests is so destabilizing, has yet to be addressed as a primary concern in international relations. In fact, it never even comes up as a topic for discussion.

The interpenetration of economies and systems of distribution and organization throughout East Asia and the world has produced an unfamiliar landscape. Koreans, for example, are grappling to understand their close economic connections with nations like Vietnam, ties that are increasingly as important as those with so-called "developed

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[1] "The Alliance of Frankenstein: China and the United States in the 21st Century" in Foreign Policy in Focus (http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/4066) March 9, 2007.
[2] Julian Delasantellis "Trinkets and treasure: China tames the US" Asia Times, August 30, 2007, http://atimes.com/atimes/China/IH31Ad02.html.

nations." Not only has a distribution system emerged that links together seamlessly at the economic level cultures which are otherwise radically different, in the case of Korea and Japan, marriages between farmers and women from Southeast Asia has resulted in a parallel social integration. Yet that trend, profound as its cultural and social implications may be, is also rarely touched upon.

Thomas Friedman points out in his book *The Earth is Flat, A Brief History of the 21st Century*[3] that China, India and many other nations have entered into a global supply chain for manufacturing and distribution that has reduced the social and economic barriers between nations and created new networks. As a result, the constant efforts of nation states to implement policies that follow the logic of their own internal discourse as an independent nation are undermined by a fluid and continuous field of trade and financial exchange. The rapid improvement, and the drop in price, of communications have made borders far less significant than before. A larger pulsating matrix of factors impacts all domestic economies. The growth of deeply integrated systems for distribution and consumption in East Asia has produced infinitely palpable networks of factories, warehouses, ports, as well as the distribution systems that have woven nations together into a contiguous fabric defy all previous conceptions of sovereignty.

Yet there is not any particular incentive for media interests, or most scholars, to accurately portray the current configuration. It is not that readers could not possibility understand the new configurations of finance, manufacturing and distribution. I have found in my own experience that efforts to objectively describe the economic and social relations of nations in East Asia at conferences has often been met by complete silence. This response is not because the points made are inaccurate, or the audience hostile, but rather because the points made are so alien to the concepts employed to define international relations.

The New Players in East Asia

Let us consider the common systemic changes that have swept across East Asia as a first step towards identifying the new constellation of forces that impact economic and social life today. With any luck, this paper can serve as an impetus for what Confucius referred to as the "rectification of names" (*zhengming*), an intellectual effort to reduce the divergence between social and political phenomena and the terms

[3] Friedman, Thomas. *The Earth is Flat, A Brief History of the 21st Century*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005.

employed to describe them. That is to say that the most serious threat to regional stability in East Asia is not North Korea's nuclear program or China's military buildup per say, but rather the misunderstandings about the nature of the state prevalent among even the most educated individuals that exacerbate tensions and could lead to unpredictable conflict at some future date.

First among the players in East Asia are the newly emerging NGOs that increasingly extend their influence around the world. Issues such as women's rights, historical truth, environmental degradation, social justice, medical care, development and the full range of policy issues are debated globally by interlocked networks of NGOs. As the reporting of facts by the commercial media is increasingly limited, the power of NGOs as a source for accurate information about local concerns continues to increase. NGOs are not necessarily products of the spontaneous activities of local citizens, they are in many cases directly influenced by the larger needs and concerns of governments and corporations, and on occasion serve as cover, or justification, for policies that otherwise have little public support.[4] They are, however, rarely made the object of analysis in studies on international relations.

So many new NGOs have emerged over the last few years that it is a serious challenge to keep up with them all. We find that increasingly the battles of vested interest groups are manifested through the rubric of the NGO. Although we see this trend most strongly in the United States, it is a universal tendency. The rise of NGO influence is directly tied to the drive for privatization that has undermined trust in government as an entity and source for unbiased information. Thus the NGO network is also driven by a need of citizens for an alternative perspective, granted that perspective is not always objective. Community organizations in Korea and Japan, for example, coordinate with each other on environmental issues thanks to the Internet, resulting in a remarkable convergence of perspective. Research centers and think tanks are also emerging in Asia as strong voices. That connective tissue extends to mainstream alliances on trade, security and telecommunications as well.

The rise of non-government organizations as an alternative to government or the mainstream corporate environment is not limited to the NGO. The cancerous twin of the NGO, organized crime, is also prospering. These organizations function on the basis of transnational links and the decay of the nation state structure has aided their rise to prominence. Yet the rise of syndicates in Asia is less of a step forward into a post-

[4] See the excellent study "Buying a Movement" produced by People for the American Way in 1996. This study details the concrete measures taken in the United States to influence policy through NGOs.

modern future than a regression to the environment 100 years ago. Large regions of East Asia, such as Manchuria, were once the domain of bandits, warlords and corrupt corporate interests that battled with each other for economic benefits in the first half of the 20th century. The potential for a return to that previous state is considerable.

As suggested above, the consolidation and homogenization of media reporting in East Asia has also impacted the socio-political landscape of East Asia. We have seen the growth of transnational uniformity in reporting growth over the last ten years, and even nations like China often display articles on economic issues in mainstream publications that look very much like they are based on reporting from Japanese or American journals. Such a degree of similarity in reporting was inconceivable even 15 years ago because of serious ideological divisions. Chinese reporting adopted certain socialist principles that forced a divergent interpretation—although by no means a more accurate one—from that found in Japanese, Korean or even American reporting. Whereas ideological division, between a communist economic and social perspective and a capitalist, or liberal, perspective, previously meant that the discourse on current issues was diametrically opposed between South Korea and China on many issues today there is a solid consensus with a corresponding decline in critical inquiry.

Even as the Korean and Japanese media clash on issues of territory and history, we find that the general perspective presented in both countries concerning the rest of the world order is quite similar. So also Chinese reporting on the six party talks presents a perspective revealing minimum variation. Media sources around the world share the same data; many of the terms and concepts they employ are similar. Part of the reason lies in the emergence of a unified system for the distribution of information in English that has directly impacted the nature of reporting in the vernacular. Sources for Asian media reporters are remarkably uniform. The consolidation of media ownership has also progressed apace in Asia, even as former media monopolies have lost their authority. Thus there is far less certainty about the reliability of information provided and much greater opportunity for general manipulation.

Local government is another important player in East Asia that has not assumed sufficient attention in recent scholarship. Increasingly, local government, representing the prefecture in Japan, or province in Korea and China, plays a critical role in international relations. Local governments in East Asia have signed a tangled web of memoranda of understanding (MOU) at the provincial and the city level that establish direct working relationships between peers. Although many such agreements may be primarily symbolic, others have the potential to impact policy, and subtly divert the decision-making process away from the central government. Although central

governments jealously guard their prerogative to set national policy for trade and economic development, local government is increasingly stepping into the arena and thereby complicating the picture.

The primary field in which local government has clearly seized the initiative is foreign investment. Local governments aggressively, compete with other local governments to recruit foreign investment. There are increasingly large budgets for promotional materials to encourage investment in local districts and many governors and mayors now spend much time traveling around the world in search of funding from foreign investors, and signing agreements with local governments, central governments and international corporations, often without any serious oversight from the central government. Thus the potential has emerged for local government to form strong economic ties with peers abroad that could eventually determine policy.

Nor are the efforts of local government entirely limited to FDI. Tourism, exports and even public relations and lobbying abroad are increasingly seen as fields of activity for local government in East Asia. Local government feels compelled to seek out alternative sources for economic development. These efforts, nevertheless, meet with strong local opposition, parallel to the drive for FDAs seen in Asia today. It is not at all clear that local government has the skills or the connections, to make serious inroads in this respect. Still, the very fact that they are making the effort has changed perceptions about the role of local government, and to some degree the process by which policy is decided. As local government becomes a perfect replica of the central government, we can expect greater efforts to expand its role in international relations and exchange. If meetings between mayors and governors in Korea and Japan far outnumber meetings between the heads of state, local government will inevitably become a primary locus for serious negotiation.

Beyond the active role of local government, we can also perceive the growth of the city state, a political entity with no visible military and minimal land which through a complex set of economic and political relations manages to assert itself internationally with an independent diplomacy and play a significant role. The primary model of a city-state in Asia is Singapore and its remarkable economic success has inspired emulators. Singapore's stable internal political environment has made it the basis for much benchmarking around Asia. Hong Kong, although it has far less autonomy than Singapore, forms a close parallel in which much of the economic sector remains under local control, perhaps more so than under British rule. But other free economic zones such as Shenzhen in China and Incheon in Korea—established in 2003, have propagated a model for development based on a self-sufficient area with an international focus.

These free economic zones provide services such as education and medicine of an international character that is distinct from the surrounding area. Such regions may be easier for foreigners to live in, but imply a serious fragmentation within the larger nation state.

Technology and its Implications

We cannot underestimate the impact that technology has had on the trends noted above towards both integration and fragmentation in East Asia. The contradiction of greater integration and concentration at an international level combined with greater social fragmentation and autonomy at a local level is best explained in terms of the impact of communication technology, and the Internet in specific. The ability of a single individual to produce sophisticated content with the full visual authority of a large institution and propagate it via the Internet, has created a new field of competition globally in which the control, manipulation, and enhancement of information is a primary measure of power and influence. That trend encourages entrepreneurs and individualism, but it also encourages fragmentation and multiple complex informal chains of command within government, companies and society as a whole. It also opens the door to the domination of the mainstream by sterile and meaningless platitudes as the economy of information inevitably follows Gresham's Law.

The fragmentation that occurs within societies as a result of disparity in income and the manipulation of the flow of information is not obvious to the layman because it is accompanied by overwhelming integration and consolidation at another level. As societies and institutions fragment into different interpretive communities based on divergent flows of information, a smaller and smaller number of content providers consolidate control over the central flow of information. Precisely because the Internet threatens to allow a single individual to effect policy through the power of his rhetoric, established institutions feel a need to limit the range of discourse, lest the influence of one be overly disruptive. This trend, however, leads others to feel that freedom of expression itself is being choked off. It also empowers marginal voices, giving them at times undue legitimacy. And the power that smaller groups have to claim legitimacy over the information they supply only further encourages fragmentation.

As Frances Cairncross notes in her book *The Death of Distance*[5] communication technology has completely restructured the relations between individuals and larger

[5] As Frances Cairncross. *The Death of Distance*. Harvard Business School, Cambridge, 1997.

groups and states. Cairncross compares the current state of communications in the world to the state of the automobile in 1910, implying that we are just at the start of a major transformation in our societies that will have profound implications. Cairncross suggests that there have been three successive revolutions in the last two centuries resulting from technological change: the falling cost of transporting goods in the 19th century, the falling cost of transporting people in the 20th century and the falling cost of transporting information in the 21st century. The final shift has allowed the close marriage of diverse interests around the world with the result that national boundaries no longer hold a critical importance. At the same time, however, a fantasyland of the functional traditional nation state has emerged in popular movies and the media, which creates the appearance of a traditional nation state. Perhaps the profoundly disturbing concept of a political world dominated by obscure interests linked over great distances is too much for most individual.

Hand-in-hand with the loss of jobs and the profound economic integration born of the death of distance is the growth of migration throughout the world. The flow of those in search of a better life from Southeast Asia and central China into Korea, Japan, Singapore and other developed nations has resulted in social fluidity and breakdown of borders not seen since the 1920s. The challenge of migration born in part of the economic and social dislocation created by economic integration has become a major force in policy within East Asia. Such immigration has created multicultural local populations in Korea, Japan and elsewhere, complicating the internal discourse on policy.[6] Now large populations within those countries no longer conform to the accepted traditions once thought essential to citizenship.

The Decay of Ideology and its Broader Implications

The shifting landscape of East Asia's economy, society, politics and cultural discourse is intimately related to the rise of new players not accounted for in the common dialogue on the nation state. It is also a product of the rapid advancement of communications technology that has both empowered new organizations to extend their messages and perceptions widely and at the same time fragmented older systems and hierarchies. Finally, a major cause for these shifts is the obvious decay of the ideologies

[6] Economic integration has coupled with radically declining birth rates in Korea, Japan and urban areas of China to drive migration today. For a thoughtful analysis see Glenda Roberts' "Labor Migration to Japan: Comparative Perspectives on Demography and the Sense of Crisis." Japan Focus, September 2007: japanfocus.org/products/details/w2519.

that once animated political and social discourse in the region.

Primitive as the communist ideology and anti-communist doctrines formed in response may have been, they formed the foundation on which individuals and organizations based their perceptions of the world and their motivation to strive for something better. Although it is too early in the march of history to assess whether it was the rise of communication technology, or the fragmentation of accepted institutions that caused such decay, it can be generalized that much of the analysis of world affairs taking place today is remarkably void of ethical judgment or assessments of the ulterior motives of leaders and groups to a degree inconceivable previously. From the end of the 1920s through the 1980s, there were communities of scholars, journalists, politicians and bureaucrats in both the communist and capitalist camps were ready to identify and denounce the extremes of the other group. Although these criticisms may not have been honest, they served the purpose of maintaining a healthy balance of ideological power, and clearing the air periodically. Such a balance has all but disappeared today.

The recession of previous ideologies has by no means lead to the world being perceived as it is—if such a thing were possible. Rather we find an increasingly confused and fractured discussion in which many individuals are incapable of articulating, or even conceiving of, the radical transformations noted above. The problem has nothing to do with education or access to information. Some of the most educated individuals seem all but incapable of coming to grips with the true implications of 911 or global warming. Rather the lack of ideological support for a critical analysis of current politics leads such individuals to concentrate on the trivial and marginal, avoiding completely the true threats that we face.

The capitalist, democratic and anti-communist discourse of the Republic of Korea, Japan and Taiwan (Republic of China) extended its roots far beyond the immediate confrontation with Communist China and Russia. That discourse included a strong emphasis on frugality and industry, on humility and chastity, and on the sacrifice of the individual for the group. The very qualities that underlie the “Asian Miracle” were directly linked to common ideological principles, often articulated in a rather rough and unseemly manner under Park Chung-hee and Chiang Kai-shek.

The result of recent ideological decay is the emergence of enormous gaps in the perception generated by the absence of that superstructure for understanding the world. Because ideology and aesthetics are abstract concepts that have all but disappeared from mainstream political science, we have a difficult time coming to deal with the most critical aspect of recent history: how such serious problems as global warming, massive corruption and degraded information be all but invisible to a large number of citizens.

Yet, I would argue that in many cases, problems of ideology and aesthetics are precisely what lie behind what we encounter these days, and because those problems are so fundamental to perception, they give us a possible tool for prying beneath the surface. There is no ideology in place to receive the present-day's challenges and therefore they are all but invisible to most.

What we find today unifying East Asia is a bland and uniform aesthetic of the modern, a radical devaluation of information driven by the ease of replication in this age, and the rise of rituals and repetition as a means of filling the gaping holes in perceptions. The uniform esthetic of the modern, in which the symbols of a positive modern are skyscrapers and a world of consumption and convenience, explains why it is so hard for many to imagine a different world, or take issues like the environment seriously. The devaluation of information through replication has created a system wherein the value of images and texts is discounted from the start and almost nothing is read carefully or thoughtfully. Finally, political rituals, most notably the Six Party Talks have come to seize center stage as if they, and not the topics discussed, were all critical.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to identify the critical changes in East Asia that impact all social, political and economic transactions. Although the rhetoric of a radically changed world that was so popular five years ago has died out, the actual transformations have not gone away, and in many cases are only the more profound in their ramifications.

It is my hope that this paper can serve as the basis for a more serious consideration of what the true security issues for East Asia and the world will be in this century. We need to move beyond the rhetoric of transformation and consider carefully what is truly different. Only then can we start to make progress towards a new approach to international relations.