

Strategic Diplomacy in Northeast Asia

By Jochen Prantl, Evelyn Goh

Northeast Asia is rife with potential conflict, given US-China great power rivalry, ongoing differences over interpretations of history between Korea and Japan and between China and Japan, simmering maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, and worries that tensions could escalate between Taiwan and the Mainland under the US presidency of Donald J. Trump. The articles in this cover package of Global Asia argue that now is the time for players in the region to embrace “strategic diplomacy.”

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This collection of essays introduces “strategic diplomacy” as a new conceptual angle for the study of the regional order in Northeast Asia. It translates the metaphor of an Asian security order as an ecosystem into a tangible conceptual framework that allows us to rethink key issues of regional order.¹ At the same time, it pushes the idea to the point where it generates critical thought to recast conventional analysis of relevant policy issues to arrive at different policy directions.

Strategy entails linking ways and means to achieve specific goals, while *diplomacy* is a vital means by which a state navigates its chosen paths toward its identified policy ends. *Strategic diplomacy* is defined as the process by which state and non-state actors socially construct and frame their view of the world; set their agendas; and communicate, contest and negotiate diverging core interests and goals. International relations tend to focus on bilateral and multilateral diplomatic relationships among *states* when studying order. By contrast, strategic diplomacy is an analytical framework to study the *systemic* implications of diplomacy in order to understand and explain what makes the region hang together. In a nutshell, the analytical focus is on diplomacy pursued to navigate the *system* rather than dyadic and polyadic state relations.

The concept of strategic diplomacy is based on the important insight that the 21st-century global order is best understood as a complex adaptive system with three key properties: inter-connectedness, non-linearity and emergence.

Interconnectedness refers to the high degree of interdependence between the individual components of a complex system. *Non-linearity* means there is a fundamental disproportionality between cause and effect. Minor events may create tipping points with major effects, such as the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008 and the subsequent onslaught of the global financial crisis. *Emergence* denotes that new phenomena emerge from the interactions of the individual components of a complex system, i.e. the whole system is more than the sum of its parts.

This complex adaptive system is shaped by in-numerable variables, has the capacity for sudden, dramatic change and is very difficult to control. An international system with this form of complexity creates serious challenges.² This is because:

- In addition to the direct effects of any action, the interconnections within a system produce *indirect* and *delayed* effects.
- When there are more than two actors in the system, the relationship between any two will be determined not just by how they act toward each other but also by the *interactions among the other members of the system*.
- Relations in a system are interactive, not additive. *Actions may not lead directly to an intended result*, because the outcome also depends on how the other elements in the system respond.

Effective strategy is therefore essential if we are to navigate the fog of uncertainty in a world filled with “unknown unknowns.” Policy-makers are increasingly faced with an infinite range of alternatives and uncertain consequences as a result of choosing each alternative. Many states today no longer possess a compelling national

narrative such as empire, religion, independence or the Cold War, on which to base their grand strategy. As a result, strategies are becoming themselves sources of contest and conflict at both the national and international levels. Given the imperative of having to prioritize among a panoply of risks and threats, the strategic underpinning of diplomatic practice is more crucial than before, particularly because the common reaction to complexity and uncertainty is to seek refuge in tactics, technocracy or sheer process. This challenge is especially acute in strategically dynamic regions like Northeast Asia.

Therefore, this *Global Asia* cover package explores what strategic diplomacy may look like in Northeast Asia, how it is managed and with what effects. The conceptual angle of strategic diplomacy encompasses three elements:

- Diplomacy undertaken with long-term *system* implications;
- Diplomacy undertaken with an accentuated strategic rationale with the objective of *system maintenance* or *system change*; and
- The (shorter-term) diplomatic practices of contesting and negotiating conflicting strategic ideas and priorities.

Our discussion of strategic diplomacy in Northeast Asia centers on four broad themes:

- 1) nuclear non-proliferation,
- 2) unification,
- 3) historical memory, and
- 4) regional order.

We address three pertinent questions about these respective issues from a system perspective:

- Where are the *entry points* for strategic diplomacy?
- What are the *tipping points*, if any, that may either maintain or change the system?
- What are the *endpoints* of strategic diplomacy in addressing the issues??

This collection of essays draws inspiration from a workshop, *Strategic Diplomacy in Northeast Asia*, co-organized by the Australian National University's Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy and Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, the East Asia Foundation and the Korean National Diplomatic Academy in May 2016.

1) NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION

Analyzing the North Korean nuclear problem through the lens of strategic diplomacy puts proliferation in its primary regional strategic context. Much policy debate about this problem stems from concerns about nuclear non-proliferation and wider worries about the asymmetrical global nuclear order. Because of this, it is easy to overlook the vital local strategic context of North Korean nuclear weapons development. How much of the diplomacy and bargaining over the North Korean nuclear issue is actually about proliferation? Prioritizing the Northeast Asian strategic context highlights that strategic diplomacy over North Korea's nuclear weapons involves trying to reconcile different demands about other related strategic questions, including the terms of a peace settlement of the Korean War, Korean re-unification and the future regional security architecture. In other words, a strategic diplomacy approach would connect the North Korean nuclear issue to its inherent strategic context within the region.

Bong-Guen Jun (Korean National Diplomatic Academy) considers how a more consciously strategic form of diplomacy — that is, diplomacy undertaken with an

accentuated strategic rationale with long-term objectives — can be forged in South Korea's efforts towards denuclearization of North Korea. He first highlights three problematic trends — the cyclical nature of nuclear crises on the peninsula, the continuous growth of North Korean nuclear capabilities and the rising costs of bargaining with Pyongyang. The essay then argues that current approaches are sub-optimal for the denuclearization objective because of insufficient understanding of North Korea, co-ordination problems, the lack of strategic focus and ineffective combinations of sanctions and incentives. Jun suggests that the concept of strategic diplomacy can assist in improving South Korean diplomacy on this issue by emphasizing the “systems” approach, in particular, by taking into account repeated interactions with North Korea and its resistance and resilience, and creating a “comprehensive strategic roadmap” for “multi-dimensional, multi-staged denuclearization efforts among various stakeholders.”

Brendan Taylor (Australian National University) argues that the Korean Peninsula during the decade from 2002 to 2012 provides a clear case of strategic diplomacy in practice. During this period, China and the United States undertook strategic co-operation at key junctures in order to achieve two long-term shared objectives: preventing nuclear proliferation and maintaining stability more broadly on the Korean Peninsula, which was viewed largely as a self-contained strategic system. This period of promise for strategic diplomacy ended in 2012 when developments in both the East and the South China Seas sharply diminished the appetite for Sino-US co-operation. During the period since, the connectivity between East Asia's traditional flashpoints has begun to intensify. Unless and until this condition abates, the inability and unwillingness of Beijing and Washington to treat the Korean Peninsula in isolation from broader East Asian strategic developments, as they had largely done during the decade from 2002, will render the pursuit of mutually beneficial strategic diplomacy here more challenging. Instead, Sino-American strategic interaction regarding the Korean Peninsula is likely to become increasingly competitive.

2) UNIFICATION

German unification in 1990 is often analyzed for potential lessons for the Korean Peninsula. One crucial aspect to note is that German unification was not preordained, but rather a deliberate strategic choice. The unification process also required significant crisis diplomacy and a concerted effort made at the leadership, diplomatic and institutional levels to see through this choice.

The strategic context for potential Korean unification (including the historical context, the international system, personalities, existing mechanisms and new institutions) will be different from the German case. Meanwhile, South Korea must engage in strategic planning for the eventuality of unification. The challenge is how to bridge the gaps between longer-term scenario planning and the actual crisis context if/when unification becomes a reality. How would South Korea achieve its strategic objective of unification? What conditions would be most conducive to a unification outcome?

Jochen Prantl (Australian National University) and **Kim Hyun-Wook** (Korean National Diplomatic Academy) compare notes from Germany and Korea by looking at entry, tipping and endpoints of strategic diplomacy on unification. They argue that political integration is the key endpoint (and challenge) that will define the strategic diplomacy of Korean unification. German unification in 1990 appeared when the Cold War disappeared. Unlike Bismarck's unification of 1871, which created a new German Reich after waging war against France, this tectonic change occurred without major bloodshed. Unlike at the Versailles conference of 1919, the political map of Cold War Europe was redrawn with the active support and consent of major powers. There was a political settlement to which all stakeholders could agree. This was the result of longer-term post-1945 developments that had created an international environment conducive but in no way predetermined to achieve unification. By contrast, in the case of Korean unification, the US, China, South

Korea and North Korea all have different strategic goals and interests. How might strategic diplomacy affect the process and practices of Korean unification?

3) HISTORICAL MEMORY

Strategic diplomacy opens up a new conceptual angle when analyzing the longstanding problems of historical memory disputes in Northeast Asia. Despite the emotive and nationalist overtones, the strategic use of diplomacy imbues even memory politics. Considering the practice of strategic diplomacy in the realm of memory highlights the often multiple audiences and purposes behind the stances and policies of state and other regional actors over historical memory. In particular, we can investigate more systematically the connections between inter-state memory contests, strategic aims and domestic political dynamics.

Amy King (Australian National University) offers a refreshing new angle on the difficult problem of historical memory disputes by unpacking the “memory politics” of an under-studied Northeast Asian case, Taiwan, and by examining how the strategic use of diplomacy features even in the realm of memory contests. She first shows how memories of Japanese colonialism have been constructed and contested by Taiwan’s political elites as a response to both debates over domestic political identity and the changing regional security environment since the 1980s. The essay argues that the contest over historical memory within Taiwan is a good case for examining the practice of strategic diplomacy we describe as “the process by which state and non-state actors socially construct and frame their view of the world; set their agendas; and communicate, contest and negotiate core interests and goals.” The essay examines how the Ma Ying-jeou government (2008-16) used “strategic memory diplomacy” — including the memory of Japanese colonialism, Chinese resistance against Japan in the Second World War and the Kuomintang’s period of martial law in Taiwan — to achieve simultaneously four apparently contradictory policy aims: stabilize cross-strait relations, maintain Taiwanese sovereignty, enhance Taiwan’s international status and strengthen Taiwan’s relationship with Japan.

4) REGIONAL ORDER

If strategy is about connecting ways, means and ends, what should be the endpoint of strategic diplomacy in Northeast Asia? Focusing on strategic goals entails planning for alternative endpoints. To do so, we have to ask some obvious questions, such as: what type of Northeast Asian strategic order will China accept? We have to consider difficult paths, such as: is a grand bargain possible in Northeast Asia? The strategic diplomatic approach also obliges us to consider unexpected, catastrophic “black swan” events, as well “black elephant” events that everybody knows may happen but are unwilling to consider seriously — for example, what might Northeast Asia’s strategic order look like without the involvement of the US?

Huang Jing (National University of Singapore) argues that the concept of strategic diplomacy is familiar to Chinese foreign policy (the term in Mandarin is zhanlüe waijiao). He examines three dimensions of strategic diplomacy evident in China’s foreign policy. First, the building of a “new model of major power relations” that seeks to put China on an equal footing in global agenda-setting and rule-making. Second, the use of joint economic development to build a “community of common destiny.” And third, the building of a Global Strategic Partnership Network that distinguishes itself from the US alliance system in at least four dimensions: it is driven by interests, not by values; it aims at promoting co-operation, not confrontation; it is inclusive, not exclusive; and it puts network members on an equal footing. The competition between China and the US for global rule-making is most pronounced in global finance and economic integration. While the US strives to maintain its predominance in rule-making, China is promoting an alternative infrastructure-led development model. The essay highlights a fundamental problem in China’s strategic diplomacy: its domestic political system is not compatible with the political mainstream of the existing global order.

Bruce W. Jentleson (Duke University) addresses the question of how the

Northeast Asian strategic order would look without the US. It situates the question in two broader contexts: a) the political context of the US 2016 presidential elections, with Donald J. Trump becoming the 45th president of the United States; and b) wider debates about US grand strategy. The essay identifies three approaches to US strategic diplomacy that can be applied to the regional order in Northeast Asia: retrenchment, regional reassertion and recalibration. Jentleson discusses each of the three possible approaches and stresses the importance of diplomatic pluralism in the region, shifting from the hub-and-spokes model based on bilateral ties with the US to a more networked model of greater bi-, tri- and multilateral ties between and among regional states.

As strategic efforts are defined in part by their ultimate “big picture” goals, **Evelyn Goh** (Australian National University) addresses the question of what the endpoint should be for strategic diplomacy in Northeast Asia. She argues that in considering the broader regional order, an ultimate goal must be to forge a feasible and sustainable “grand bargain” among the resident great powers. To contextualize the debate about a possible new grand bargain for the analytical and policy challenges of strategic diplomacy in Northeast Asia, this essay offers three entry-points for discussion. First, it sets out the comparative advantages of adopting a grand bargain framework to understanding how a new regional order may be negotiated. Second, it reminds us that prior strategic bargains already exist in the wider Asia-Pacific region, and considers how these may interact with the proposals for a new grand bargain. Finally, it briefly reviews some recent key Chinese ideas about such bargains to highlight the obstacles and opportunities faced by strategic diplomats seeking to broker a new grand bargain in Northeast Asia.

The insights offered in these essays are intended to be the beginning rather than the end of a wider debate that discusses and takes seriously a systems approach towards the study of regional order in Northeast Asia. It forms part of a larger research program, *Strategic Diplomacy in the 21st Century*, currently being developed by the guest editors.

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Notes

1 Amitav Acharya usefully introduces the idea of an Asian security order as an ecosystem, but without conceptualizing it any further. See Amitav Acharya, “Security Pluralism in the Asia-Pacific: Reshaping Regional Order,” *Global Asia*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 2016), pp. 12-17.

2 See Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[Back to Issue](#)