

Introduction to the Special Issue

Mikael Weissmann and Mingjiang Li

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“Power” remains a central, if not indispensable, concept in the social sciences and humanities. In no discipline is this clearer than international relations (IR), where the distribution of power is believed to explain many outcomes in international politics, particularly the propensity for war and peace (Mearsheimer 2010; Friedberg 2011). The importance of the concept notwithstanding, academic and policy debates about international power have long occurred within overly restrictive conceptual boundaries, focusing on the distribution of power defined as tangible assets to explain international politics at the expense of other ways in which power is exercised. Even though this materialist theory of power has failed to help us understand some of the most conspicuous international developments of recent decades, it continues to permeate the literature about international politics.

There are few places in the world where power is as crucial to shaping international dynamics as in East Asia. The critical question of whether a power shift is ongoing in the region, from Japan and the United States to China, is a central preoccupation of contemporary IR. Given the actors that are involved, the region is arguably the epicenter of a possible global power shift from the West to the East, and from the North to the South. In the East Asian region, a power shift has been seen as impending for more than two decades (Betts 1993; Friedberg 1993; Roy 1994). Today, the concept of a regional power shift is widely accepted both among scholars and observers outside of academia (Shambaugh 2005; Mearsheimer 2010; Layne 2018). A consensus has emerged that there has been a redistribution of capabilities among the major players in the region, although there are different opinions about the extent and outcome of such power shift (Li and Kemburi 2014; see also the *Asian Perspective* special issue “The East Asia Power Shift: A Critical Appraisal,” vol. 38, no. 3, 2014; of particular interest is the introduction by Linus Hagström and Bjorn Jerden).

This special issue goes beyond materialistic power theory to examine the role and impact of narratives themselves in the (apparent) power shift in East Asia. It investigates the extent to which the narratives produced and spread by key actors succeed in producing effects on third parties, exploring if and how they succeed in shaping their preferences, interests, and identities regarding contested issues in East Asia. Its focus is on the narratives about China, Japan, and the United States. The underlying idea is that it is the narrative(s) that ultimately define(s) the dynamics of the East Asian security setting and IR more broadly, creating a framework for what actions are possible, when, and for whom. In short, it is ultimately the victorious/dominant narratives that themselves define what is seen as legitimate and illegitimate, what is normal and abnormal, and ultimately what is within the realm of possibility and what is not.

Special emphasis is put on third parties, as it is they who are the audiences and ultimately the judges of what narrative to accept or is most attractive. For example, the fact that narratives

about a more “assertive” and “threatening” China have received increased attention and acceptance is limiting China while at the same time opening new space for Japan and US foreign policy, as they are perceived as important to manage China’s purported rise.

This special issue starts with an article by Mikael Weissmann titled “Understanding Power (Shift) in East Asia: The Sino-US Narrative Battle about Leadership in the South China Sea.” Weissmann analyzes competing US and Chinese narratives about the South China Sea. He argues that the practice of calculating power shifts in terms of changing distribution of material capabilities is inadequate. The article aims to complement existing literature by taking ideational and normative dimensions of power into account. The article asks what the Chinese narrative of power and leadership in the South China Sea looks like and how it is perceived by others in comparison with the dominant US narrative. Weissmann concludes that while a “hard” power transition is ongoing, China’s preferred narrative has yet to become widely accepted and the US narrative remains dominant for now. Nevertheless, he argues that China has been making progress in shifting the narrative of what the future could look like, with China’s vision for a post-US regional and global order now seen as a possible alternative.

The second contribution, by Alice D. Ba, focuses on China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in a Southeast Asian context. Ba notes that China’s BRI is viewed by most as symbolic of a new era of Chinese initiative and ambition. However, although much attention has focused on how the BRI fits into China’s—and specifically Xi Jinping’s—grand narrative of national rejuvenation, less has been said about regional narratives—that is, the narratives of China’s target audiences. Ba’s work addresses this oversight, considering the case of Singapore in relation to the BRI. Specifically, her article gives attention to strategic narratives, which offer analytic windows into the complex relationships being negotiated between China and Southeast Asian states. Strategic narratives, as instruments of policy, also play a role in constructing the

strategic space in which the BRI enters, with implications for the opportunities and constraints faced by China in Southeast Asia.

The focus on the BRI continues in Mingjiang Li's contribution, titled "China's Economic Power in Asia: The Belt and Road Initiative and the Local Guangxi Government's Role." Li notes that China has conscientiously leveraged its economic power and win-win cooperation in its foreign policy narrative. He argues that with China's growing economic power having been identified as a major factor in generating profound transformations of the strategic landscape in Asia, Beijing's interest in using its economic power for the pursuit of geopolitical objectives remains strong, with many analysts believing that the ambitious BRI represents the continuation and even intensification of such Chinese policy. Li's research unpacks China's economic power in its external relations by focusing on the role that Guangxi, a subnational government in China, has played in facilitating the emergence of the BRI and actively participating in the implementation of the initiative. His study suggests that in-depth knowledge about local governments' activism in socioeconomic engagements with neighboring countries contributes significantly to a more nuanced understanding of China's power, particularly its economic power in Asia.

The article that follows shifts focus to Japan and changes in Japan's strategic narratives. Its author, Hidekazu Sakai, argues that examining the changes in Japanese security discourses can provide clues to understanding Japan's security and geopolitical behavior in recent years. This article sheds light on Okazaki Hisahiko, a "military realist" who was Abe's strategic mentor and a heretic in Japanese security discourse who fought against the mainstream political realism represented by Nagai Yōnosuke, who became a defender of the Yoshida Doctrine in the 1980s. Sakai notes that military realists emphasize the importance of geopolitics with the "eternal factor" of geography along with military development. According to Sakai, after the Cold War, with the nuclear threat of North Korea and the rise of China, the influence of the

military realists' narratives has buttressed the credibility of assertive Japanese leaders, including Abe. This article thus offers key insights into why Japan's security policy has been dominated by geopolitics through its examination of narrative changes in the post-Cold War period, revealing how military realists' narratives have "defeated" other narratives, among them those of political realists, unarmed neutralists (later the civilian power school), and Japanese Gaullists.

Hidekazu Sakai's article is followed by another focusing on Japan, titled "The Relationship Between Narratives and Security Practices: Pushing the Boundaries of Military Instruments in Japan." Here Petter Y. Lindgren and Wrenn Yennie Lindgren explore the significant changes that Japanese security policy has undergone in recent years. They note that Japanese policymakers have engaged in intense debates over the integration of offensive weapons systems into Japan's Self Defense Forces as part of transforming Japan's military capabilities. In particular, the Abe government has decided to purchase long-range cruise missiles for its new F-35A jetfighters and is currently investigating whether to reconstruct a newly built helicopter carrier into an aircraft carrier. The authors contend that while specific policy proposals continued to divide policymakers and other stakeholders, the underlying story specifying Japan's place in East Asia, the rise of China, the threat of North Korea's missile and nuclear programs, the tight security relationship with the United States, and the vulnerability of the Japanese archipelago faces little core criticism. The article argues that the lack of alternative national security narratives suggests either that a Japanese security consensus emerged in the mid-2010s or that the narrative is strong enough to pressure policymakers to refrain from critiques of it through the significant costs incurred by opposition. If the latter were true, it would indicate that a hegemonic narrative exists—but not necessarily a consensus. The authors find that this dominant narrative has provided a necessary foundation for unorthodox policy proposals, which arguably have enabled the Abe government to push through changes to the

Self-Defense Forces to expand its capabilities and international role, a move that would have been far from politically viable only a decade ago.

The next article in this special issue shifts focus once again. In “Contending Narratives of the International Order: US/Chinese Discursive Power and Its Effects on the UK,” Rex Li analyzes the multifaceted competition between the United States and China that has attracted much scholarly attention. While existing studies tend to focus on the material dimensions of the US-China rivalry, Li analyzes the master/counter narratives produced by the two great powers that are intended to exercise their discursive power in shaping the geopolitical environment and legitimizing their global roles. Specifically, he examines the competing US and Chinese narratives on the international order and assesses the impact of these narratives on shaping the values and interests of the United Kingdom. His article demonstrates that China’s world order narratives have limited influence on the United Kingdom due to fundamental differences in their political values, ideologies, and systems. Nevertheless, British leaders and policy elites are becoming increasingly receptive to Chinese narratives, amid China’s growing economic power and “disciplinary power” to coerce other countries to accept its preferred narratives, particularly in the context of the uncertainties the United Kingdom faces in the post-Brexit international economic environment.

This special issue has spawned some new research questions that appear to merit further scholarly attention. First, how do we relate our discussions on the power–narrative–third party nexus to the theoretical literature on soft power and smart power? Much of the existing literature on soft power appears to separate storytelling and narratives from material power sources. Our studies suggest that this decoupling may be neither necessary nor useful. Integrating power, discourse, and third party may help resolve some of the theoretical conundrums that the soft power literature has encountered. Second, the tridimensional approach illustrated in this special issue may offer a useful perspective for studies on the future evolution of regional order in Asia.

Many existing studies on the development of regional order in Asia focus either on major powers (or their strategies and policies) or regional architecture and institutions. The research collected in this special issue suggests that a synthesis of the three dimensions could be used to generate fresh insights into mega-trends in the region.

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Note

Mikael Weissmann is an Associate Professor in War Studies and Head of Research- and Deputy Head of the Land Operations Section at the Swedish Defence University. He is also a Senior Research Fellow at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs and a member of CSCAP-EU and the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC). Previously he worked at, among others, the Swedish Defence Research Agency, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), and Copenhagen, Uppsala, and Stockholm universities. He has been a Visiting Fellow at the University of Warwick (UK) and Peking, Renmin, and China Foreign Affairs universities (China). His research themes include power shift in East Asia, East Asian security with focus on China, war studies and conflict management, and peacebuilding. He has a special

interest in the Belt and Road Initiative, the South China Sea, the North Korean nuclear conflict, and cross-strait relations. He can be reached at Mikael.weissmann@fhs.se.

Mingjiang Li is an Associate Professor at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is also the Coordinator of the China Program at RSIS. He received his PhD in political science from Boston University. His main research interests include Chinese foreign policy, Chinese politics, China-ASEAN relations, Sino-US relations, and Asia-Pacific security. He frequently participates in various track-two events on East Asian regional security. He is the author/editor/coeditor of thirteen books, the most recent being *China's Economic Statecraft* (2017) and *New Dynamics in US-China Relations: Contending for the Asia Pacific* (2014). He can be reached at ismjli@ntu.edu.sg.

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