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The Balance of Power in Asia: A Challenge for Europe?

Valérie Niquet

- 1 International relations in Asia, behind the appearance of successful globalisation, are characterised by being consistently governed by trials of strength and by the principles of *realpolitik*—witness the ceaseless build-up of conventional and nuclear arsenals in the region, especially in China and Japan¹. The end of the Cold War and the strategic empowerment that this has brought about have permitted a more violent expression of ancient ambitions backed up with new material resources². This is attested, despite the dominant discourse on the progress of regionalisation and economic integration, by the violent anti-Japanese incidents that took place in the major Chinese cities in April last year. The anxious statements by the Japanese Foreign Minister, Aso Taro, confronted by growing Chinese power, have sharply highlighted the influence and the destabilising nature of the great power rivalries in the area.
- 2 Moreover, these rivalries seem to be hardening under the influence of a Chinese leadership that is ideologically on the defensive, and which seeks its traditional justification in the aggressive assertion of nationalism. China's hard-line stance is based on its economic development and also on its military (and, in particular, nuclear) capacity. It does not hesitate to threaten Taiwan, or even the United States³. In response, India and especially Japan are adopting an increasingly tough stance: we are witnessing a worrying trend. Until the end of the 1980s, Japan sought to establish itself as a soft power⁴, adopting a strategy of overall security based on encouraging regionalisation, democratisation and a controlled use of development aid programmes, while reducing the military elements of security. But the rising level of threats from North Korea and China, strongly resented by a nation that had hitherto chosen to see itself as without enemies, has led Tokyo to renew its interest in acquiring the means for effective military action. Today in Asia, among those least democratic regimes in the region, hopes of peaceful progress have faded amid an upward spiral of rising tensions.
- 3 In the Western world, and particularly within the countries of the European Union, the persistence of a framework of classical analysis of international relations in the region

is masked by two erroneous conceptions. The first is the illusion of identity, which encourages students to tack an external model of analysis onto a political and strategic reality that is completely different. Reality contradicts the post-modern theses of the “end of history” or the “clash of civilisations”: such theories, in total ignorance of the regional strategic situation, see a united Confucianist Sino-Japanese world that is in reality profoundly split.

- 4 In Asia, as an Indian analyst pointed out recently, citing Nixon and Kissinger, “the road to peace still depends on a balance of power”, all the more so in that, for the People’s Republic of China—which, while it is not yet central in terms of power, has become so in terms of damage potential—the Marxist-Leninist conception of permanent conflict is still relevant today⁵.
- 5 A second false analytical grid is brought about by the fact that the dominant discourse on the progress of globalisation and integration is picked up by the regional governments themselves. This discourse enables them to “hide their knives behind their smiles” (*cao li cang dao*)⁶, by conforming to the politically correct rules of discourse on international relations.
- 6 In Asia, the progress of economic interdependence, which is undeniable, goes in step with a strategic withdrawal by some states to the pursuit of strictly national interests. First among these is the People’s Republic. At the regional level, economic interdependence gathers pace and plans for free trade areas are on the increase, even though these projects are also a field for the expression of power rivalries. At the political level, regional and sub-regional forums for dialogue proliferate, from the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to ASEAN, ASEAN+1 or ASEAN+3, by way of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO), the Boao Forum for Asia, the SAARC, the six-sided dialogue on North Korea—
- 7 which some would have liked to perpetuate as a forum for dialogue on security in Northeast Asia—APEC, ASEM or the new “East Asian Summit” (whose first meeting, last December in Kuala Lumpur, served mainly to emphasise its limitations). So we are witnessing an institutional increase in bilateral, multilateral, regional, extra regional structures, “track 1” (official dialogue) or “track 2” (semi official dialogue). One of the main characteristics of such structures is their ineffectiveness in periods of crisis, as was evident following the tsunami in December 2004 and the Pakistan earthquake in the autumn of 2005. In reality, this proliferation of structures only demonstrates how implacable rivalries persist behind the appearances of multilateralism. Each power attempts to control the regional dialogue.
- 8 Even though the discourse on integration is the only one allowed among international authorities for anyone aiming to appear responsible, this theme has become an important subject for reflection in China, where it is in step with an older discourse, an older concern, about “the end of the old Cold War model for big power relationships”. This reflection comes within the scope of the debates that have arisen over the concepts of “peaceful emergence” (*heping jueqi*) or “peaceful development” (*heping fazhan*)⁷.
- 9 Taken together, these elements of the discourse on China’s peaceful emergence and the progress towards regional integration are designed to recreate an Asian sphere of influence focused on China, one that excludes all outside interference, particularly from the United States. Because of this, and official statements notwithstanding,

interdependence is in reality perceived by the Chinese government as a weakness. Still more worryingly, it seems that, for the new group in power, today's priority is to assert the "interests of the country" which, it is supposed, are insufficiently taken into account by foreign powers. Particular targets of this new political orientation are the European Union (on the question of lifting the embargo on arms sales) and Japan's more assertive ambitions on the international scene.

- 10 In a similar vein, China makes much of its support for theories about the emergence of new "multilateral" risks (various forms of trafficking, public health, the environment, natural disasters and even terrorism). The main purpose of all this is to help conceal the traditional rivalries, and to nurture the consensual discourse expounded in numerous forums⁸.

A sphere of competition

- 11 The consensual discourse is based on the lowest common denominator, the search for a "stable and peaceful environment favourable to economic development". But behind this façade, rivalries are intensifying: they govern the whole sphere of foreign relations, not only within the region but also between the region and the outside world.
- 12 Several types of conflict are to be found in the area, some old, some new. They tend to feed off each other. Listed as "couples in conflict" are India and China, China and Japan, Japan and Russia, but also Russia and China, India and Pakistan, China and Vietnam, Japan and North Korea, China and South Korea and, of course, China and the United States, and even, to some extent, China and North Korea⁹. Add to those the "domestic" conflicts such as the question of Taiwan or the dispute between the two Koreas which, inherited from a past age, are part of today's power politics, acquiring a new logic that goes beyond that of the Cold War disputes. We are faced, then, by a tangle of different conflicts all of which, nevertheless, if we evaluate them according to their permanent character, and not according to their present degree of tension, revolve in the main around the pole of the People's Republic.
- 13 In this context, there are two disputing couples that dominate the Asian strategic landscape, which respond to an autonomous logic, but which also structure the balance of power at the regional level and even beyond. We are referring to the Sino-Indian conflict on the one hand and the Sino-Japanese conflict on the other. While relations between China and India are going through a warmer phase, for reasons of strategic priority determined by China, those between China and Japan are going through a worrying phase of increasing tension, which is attested by the growing number of incidents¹⁰.
- 14 The rivalry between China and Japan is based on the radical opposition of two conceptions of returning to "normality"—conceptions that are mutually exclusive. The first is Japan's ambition to play a political role, even in matters of security, on the international scene. To China, this is unacceptable because it challenges a world order favourable to Peking's interests, one based on the legitimacy and the superiority of China's political power set against Japan's economic power. Tokyo's candidacy for permanent membership of the Security Council is invariably rejected by China because of the immediate effect on the balance of power and still more on the appearance of power in Asia¹¹.
- 15 The assertion of China's power, its capacity to block the emergence of rival powers, are part of the process of legitimising the Chinese political system. The assertion of Chinese power abroad is designed to demonstrate the power of the government at home. The

Chinese Communist Party's self-assigned mission is to defend China's power, the last refuge of its legitimacy and its only remaining means of setting itself apart from those regimes denounced as corrupt and weak during the last years of the Empire and from the Nationalist Republic¹². Unlike its predecessors, the Communist Party claims to re-establish Chinese power in all its glory and to prevent any outside interference¹³.

- 16 Because of this, as China develops, a system of international relations particularly prone to crises and founded on power politics has been established in Asia. For its part, Tokyo is anxious about the emergence of a Chinese power for which the return to normality would be a return to a world order of the past, founded on Asia's acceptance of China as the region's legitimate centre. A Chinese power that sets up Japan as a scapegoat for the government's shortcomings and frustrations. These rivalries between regional powers entail three concrete results: they raise the need to strengthen military capacity; they draw outside powers into regional quarrels; and they call for diplomatic efforts to build up alliances and counter-alliances.

Three consequences
Developing military capacity

- 17 For China, the development of military strength could become at least as urgent an objective as economic growth, in a return to the classical theory of *fu guo qiang bing* (rich country, powerful army) propounded by the jurists¹⁴.
- 18 In fact, China today is actively developing the elements of military strength. Its nuclear and ballistic capacities have been steadily built up since the end of the Cold War despite the disappearance of threats against China, even though on a world-wide basis—and particularly when compared with the United States—China's strength in conventional terms remains limited.
- 19 Japan is also building up, within the limits imposed by its constitution, its defensive capacity, including that of “deterrence by denial”; the Ballistic Missile Defence project (BMD) is designed as much to counter Chinese missiles as North Korean ones. At the same time, the new National Defence Programme Outline published in December 2004 by the Defence Agency mentions for the first time the People's Republic of China as a direct threat “to follow carefully”, and no longer as a potential or indirect threat, because of China's strengthening of its nuclear and ballistic capacity as well as its navy and air force¹⁵. More worrying for Peking, on February 10th 2005, Tokyo and Washington published a declaration that included among their shared strategic preoccupations a peaceful solution to the Taiwan question.
- 20 Tokyo is attempting to strengthen its status as a military power. That is the meaning we must attach to its military deployment in the Indian Ocean alongside the Americans in the context of the war against terrorism, and again in Southeast Asia to its humanitarian initiatives following the tsunami¹⁶. Thus, Japan is reacting to its perception of China as increasingly aggressive, and favouring the principle of effective defence rather than that of minimum capacity. In the same way, India justified its nuclear tests in 1998 by its need to respond to the Chinese threat.

Drawing in outside powers

- 21 Despite the end of the Cold War and the recurrent temptation to withdraw or disengage, the regional expectations of American military power as a force for stability have been raised. Japan unceasingly reaffirms how vital are its security accords with the United States: its firm pledges extend to sending troops to Iraq, despite internal opposition and some doubts in Tokyo as to the rightness of the strategy. Peking constantly denounces this maintenance of alliances inherited from the Cold War. It

resents the fact that the United States is still engaged in “its” area, particularly in Southeast Asia and taking its stand alongside Taiwan.

- 22 While the United States is committed to the hilt, the European powers are too, though to a lesser degree. Their commitment is generally limited to the political sphere, even though they do now mention the need to nurture a real strategic partnership. The very idea of dialogue between Europe and Asia can be questioned. The European Union (EU) or individual European states, despite their hesitations and despite assessments tending to favour consensus, are required to choose between the emerging power of China, on the one hand, and China’s “rivals” on the other. This was demonstrated by the arguments over lifting the embargo against arms sales to China. Such debates are more than just the expression of American pressure. They also reflect strategic preoccupations, especially in Japan. Furthermore, the question of the embargo underlined the necessity for a dialogue between the EU and Japan, a country that until then had discussed security questions exclusively with the United States.
- 23 Lastly, the recent tensions raised between Tokyo and Beijing in connection with picking Russia as an energy partner show how Moscow can also be drawn into this problem of choice¹⁷.

Regional diplomatic exchanges

- 24 Rivalries between states are expressed in diplomatic exchanges at the regional level. These can be carried on through the medium of local people. The partners of Beijing, Tokyo or New Delhi are drawn willy-nilly into bidding for alliances and counter-alliances. Sometimes they can profit by them, particularly if the presence of the United States as ultimate arbiter of the balance of power is maintained.
- 25 China’s aim is to achieve a regional strategy that will reduce the influence of the United States in the area. There is some discussion of a new form of “Asian values”, taking up the notion of excluding outsiders from regional forums, an idea that was in vogue before the 1998 crisis. One such forum was the East Asian Economic Caucus projected by the Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir bin Mohamad. The notion encounters the same difficulties in practice, being opposed by states that, like Japan, are eager to keep a strong US commitment to the area. The debate about the membership of the East Asian Summit, held in December last year in Kuala Lumpur and including Australia, New Zealand and India but not the United States, underlines these divergences of interest and the lack of any common Asian perspective on security questions.
- 26 At the strictly regional level, Beijing has to build a network of alliances according to an assessment of the strategic priorities or, as Mao Zedong would have put it, according to the principal and secondary contradictions. Thus, India, which is today a secondary threat, is courted, even though Beijing has not abandoned its favoured partnerships with Pakistan and Burma, its traditional means of controlling Indian power. Japan, on the contrary, appears increasingly to be a principal threat, despite the close economic co-operation between the two countries¹⁸.
- 27 Delhi, for its part, is attempting to stay close to Tokyo, the Southeast Asian countries and the United States while conserving close links with Moscow. While it has opened a strategic dialogue with Beijing in January 2005, and while the Chinese Prime Minister, Wen Jiabao, did go to India in April to boost trade co-operation between the two Asian giants, the tensions arising from great power rivalry persist. And the limits to rapprochement are still defined by Chinese reluctance to see equal partners emerging in Asia who might come to compete with Beijing’s privileged position, especially within

the UN Security Council. In what Beijing interprets as preparation for a naval blockade, Delhi has sent warships to the Pacific, to the South China Sea, to Japan, to Vietnam, to South Korea and to the Philippines, and has taken part in patrolling the Malacca Strait¹⁹. At the same time, despite a proclaimed wish for rapprochement with India, China is still courting Pakistan, with which a new friendship treaty has been signed. It includes in particular a significant element of military co-operation: there is a plan jointly to develop a new training aircraft, another for China to build a new port on the Indian Ocean, and a project for Beijing to supply a second nuclear reactor for the Chashma power plant²⁰.

- 28 Similarly, the whole of Southeast Asia is the target area for competing sales campaigns by Tokyo, Beijing and Delhi, particularly in the economic sphere, making rival bids to set up multilateral or bilateral free-exchange zones. The attractions for countries in the region are, in theory, far from negligible, since they offer the possibility of three-sided deals and some haggling. But these advantages can be exploited only if a presence from outside, the United States, ensures a sufficiently level playing field in the area. Only the United States is today perceived as powerful enough to prevent China assuming too great a dominance or exerting too great a pressure over its neighbours.
- 29 In an area of vital importance by reason of its economic influence, relations between states are governed by principles that may appear, especially in Europe, obsolete and extremely destabilising. Asia, being entirely given over to its regional power struggles, lies mainly outside the European sphere of influence. This is because Europe, unlike the United States, cannot offer any immediate guarantee of security or balance based on military power. Europe's position might prove to be particularly uncomfortable. Its responsibilities in Asia are still far more limited than those of the United States, whose presence in the region is not seriously contested. Yet it is obliged to make choices, even though the way the EU works makes it difficult for the Europeans to form a common strategy²¹. In an area dominated by power struggles, only a real military power could be in a position to play a role going beyond words or the mere pursuit of economic co-operation. But a new role would require new acceptance. Europe must appreciate the gap that exists, in terms of strategic development, between its own post-Cold War stance and the situation in Asia, where Cold War analytical criteria are still relevant.
- 30 Translated from the French original by Philip Liddell

NOTES

1. Since the end of the Cold War, China's defence budget has increased by an average of 10% a year in real terms. Three new powers have crossed the military nuclear threshold (India, Pakistan and probably North Korea).
2. One of the functions of the concept of "war against terrorism" is to reconsider the Asian strategic theatre as a focus of global security.
3. On this subject, see recent statements by Chinese General Zhu Chenghu. He warned that a conventional attack on Chinese interests could provoke a nuclear response from

Peking (*The Guardian*, Peking, July 16th 2005)—a comment that exposed him only to a belated and very minor punishment.

4. The elements of “soft power” have not disappeared, particularly in the economic and cultural fields. On this subject, see Joseph S Nye, “Japan’s Soft Power, Its Limits and Potential”, *Gaiko Forum*, June 2004.

5. “Despite differences of scale, it would be probably less misleading to view the Chinese government’s strategies of openness and economic reform as a prolonged super-NEP, rather than as a gradual political evolution”. Subhash Kapila, *India’s New Government and its China Policy Challenge*, Indo-Asian News Service, October 13th 2004.

6. This idea exists in another version: *kou mi fu jian* (WWW, honey on the lips, sword in the belly), *Sanshiliu ji jieshuo*, (Commentaries on the 38 stratagems), Jinshen chubanshe, Beijing, 1995.

7. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has published on the Internet all the contributions to the conference entitled “China’s Peaceful Rise?”, which was held in Washington in September 2004.

8. H.C. Stackpole, “Prospects for Security in the Asia Pacific Region 2000-2010”, in Satu P Limaye, Yasuhiro Matsuda (eds.), *Domestic Determinants and Security Policy Making in East Asia*, NIDS, Tokyo, November 2000.

9. In the case of China and South Korea, we may cite the question of the Koguryo heritage. When it comes to North Korea, we could point to the episode of the Sinuiju special economic zone.

10. Denny Roy, “Sources and limits of Sino-Japanese tensions”, *Survival*, summer 2005.

11. China’s attitude is positive in the case of Germany, and more ambiguous towards India. On Japanese claims to “normality”, see “Japan’s SDF Witness 50 years of Change”, *People’s Daily Online*, July 30th 2004.

12. All the more so since corruption is, according to Chinese leaders themselves, one of the main problems that the government has to tackle.

13. Liu Jie, *Chugoku jin no Rekishikan* (The point of view of the Chinese on history), *Bungeisha*, Tokyo, 1999.

14. A theory developed under the Qin dynasty, which unified the empire in 221 BC. The theory was taken over by Japan in the Meiji era and then re-imported to China, without much success, by the late nineteenth century reformers.

15. *Japan Times*, December 12th 2004.

16. A deployment that was in strong contrast to the feeble show put on by the Chinese.

17. Russia has been particularly involved in the rivalry between Tokyo and Beijing over the route, still not settled, of the future pipe-line designed to connect the Siberian oilfields with a) China first, or b) the Pacific coast open to the ocean and to Japan.

18. As in the case of Taiwan, mutual interests at the economic level cannot mask the continuance of implacable strategic rivalries that, at the last resort, take precedence.

19. *Indo-Asian News Service*, October 13th 2004.

20. *Chinadaily.com.cn*, April 6th 2005.

21. Michael Yahuda, “Europe and America in Asia: Different Beds, Same Dreams”, George Washington University, Sigur Center Asia Paper No. 18, 2004.

RÉSUMÉS

International relations in Asia, behind a façade of regional integration, remain governed by pragmatism and power politics. So the strategic situation in Asia is dominated by a dynamic of tension, mainly emanating from the Chinese mainspring, leading in turn to the strengthening of military capacity and posing some difficult choices for governments across the region and elsewhere. This lack of progress, despite the disruptions that followed the end of the Cold War, poses a real challenge to Europe which, on the contrary, is intent upon reshaping itself according to completely different principles.