Unintended interdependence: Conflict-driven cooperation in Northeast Asia

High politics in Northeast Asia has for some time been dominated by legacies of the Second World War in the form of controversies over islands (ownership post de-colonisation), school history textbook writings (deeds and number of deaths involved), apologies (for those deeds) and the ‘comfort women system’ (questions ranging from its very existence to how its victims should be properly compensated). All of these issues are recurrently dealt with according to a logic that ties the domestic realm to the international in a way that upholds the regional status quo. These conflicts have been difficult to handle within the frameworks of established International Relations Theorising (IRT), since they span across the perhaps most central dividing line of the discipline, that between mainstream realism and liberalism. Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye in *Power and Interdependence revisited* (1987) ten years after the original publication of *Power and Interdependence* (1977) suggested that although the pendulum had swung from the predominately liberal decade in which their work was produced to one generally understood to be dominated by realism, complex interdependence prevailed (1987:725). By this, they opened up for the possibility of realist and liberal explanations of world politics to co-existing. Today, forty years after the original publication, interdependence still prevails. This paper suggests that a different understanding of its complexity, however, enhances the realism and applicability of the framework so that not only intended, but also unintended interdependencies are taken into account. That is, so that the maintenance of the status quo in Northeast Asia can be simultaneously understood as a question of power-political rivalry and interdependence in the form of the, from general IRT perspective, seemingly contradictory dynamic of conflict-driven cooperation. Untended interdependence, the paper suggests, provides a way of assessing regional dynamics in Northeast Asia from the perspective of the interlinkages that prevail between otherwise separated theoretical resources. In articulating this account, I draw on the critical potential of Keohane and Nye’s original assessment as well as on the explanatory potential of realism, although from a different perspective than the mainstream. By abandoning the mainstream understanding of realism, I leave the notion of control as the structuring principle of the international system to instead refocus on contingency (cf. Walker 1993). By way of a conclusion, I suggest that Keohane and Nye should take their hunches more seriously as well as to let go of the realist caricature in order to explore the potential of different versions of realism for their framework of complex interdependence.

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1 The notion of a ‘system’ targets denials of its systematic and forceful character.
2 The ever on-going so-called ‘First Debate’ in the discipline of IR concerns precisely the division between realism and liberalism. It has been suggested that successive disciplinary debates are mere variations of its theme (Walker 1993).
3 I here refer to the caricature of tendencies in mainstream International Relations theorising to assess world politics as a question of either cooperation or conflict.
Paper aim and outline

Several paradoxes are at work in the discrepancy between theory and practice in the above description. The aim of this paper is to highlight the loopholes in general theorising that I suggest open up for alternative assessments of regional politics in Northeast Asia. First, I suggest, the very interdependencies between the domestic and the international that uphold the status quo rather than to invoke the changes that characterise the rhetoric of national legislators, undermine the clear separation of the domestic and international realms. What I suggest is that the proxy conflicts over islands, history writing, apologies and the ‘comfort women system’ serve to hold up the status quo in the region rather than to realise the political promises that are made on domestic arenas. As such, continuities prove more interesting to explore than alleged changes. Second, Keohane and Nye seem to articulate their account on the basis of separations, even though their stipulated aim is to demonstrate interdependence. Third, their aim seems to be to open up for dynamics apart from military force, while they at the same time stick to precisely military force as the ultimate key to the workings of world politics.

Political realism

To assessing political realism from the viewpoint of its core characteristics, by widening the so-called first debate in the discipline of IRT to pertain to also other accounts than those of mainstream realism and liberalism (cf. Walker 1993), the caricature of political realism may be widely applied. As its core feature, the caricature entails the demarcation and separation of individual units in world politics. Much theorising in IRT departs from this assumption. R. B. J. Walker goes as far as to define the discipline as marked by it (1993).

My second engagement with political realism emerges from my departure from the Hobbesian notion of control as the defining feature of world politics (cf. Walker 1993). Building on Walker, I suggest that contingency provides a worthwhile point of exploration (ibid.). I build this on the following quote:

The three main characteristics of complex interdependence give rise to distinctive political processes, which translate power resources into power as control of outcomes (Keohane – Nye 1989:29-30).

Methodology

While Keohane and Nye focused on change and thereby generated problems of scope (1987), I suggest that a focus on continuities shifts the terms of analysis by foregoing the problems involved in tracking changes. By instead tracing continuities, the fundamental methodological problem of first having to establish the change that is to be explained can be foregone.

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4 The use of caricature here implies the standard canon in International Relations Theory with its many simplifications and omissions (cf. Walker 1993).
Unintended interdependence in Northeast Asian context

While, as initially stated in this paper, political realism in general is understood to have dominated explanations of world politics during the post-war (1989:23), Japan’s post-war is fundamentally conditioned by the Peace Paradigm that comprises the so-called Peace Constitution and its ensuing Peace Narrative: a story about the novelty of peoplehood in Japan’s post-war. As such, elite politics in post-war Japan provides an ample point of departure for developing my account of unintended interdependence, since realist logic in this context was complemented by pacifism. To return to the caricature of political realism, Keohane and Nye assert that:

For political realists, international politics, like all other politics, is a struggle for power but, unlike domestic politics, a struggle dominated by organized violence. [...] The assumptions of political realists, whose theories dominated the postwar period, are often an inadequate basis for analysing the politics of interdependence (Keohane – Nye 1989:23).

By opening up for a widening beyond military force, Keohane and Nye’s main aim, as far as I understand it, was to explain change in international regimes (1989:23, 27). Interdependence, they suggested, prevails as “world politics [prove] to be very different than under realist conditions” (ibid.:24). Their introduction to complex interdependence begins with these words:

One’s assumptions about world politics profoundly affect what one sees and how one constructs theories to explain events (Keohane – Nye 1989:23).

By suggesting that the conditions of world politics proved different than what was commonly assumed at the time of their initial writing, Keohane and Nye pointed out that a world that is different from one constituted by realist claims to the necessity of power-political rivalry is possible.

To addressing assumptions at the fundamental level, following Walker 1993, I suggest that the origins of the claims rather than the claims in themselves are addressed in the proxy conflicts over islands, history writings, apologies and the ‘comfort women system’, from both power-political and interdependence perspective. What emerges is the conclusion that the two are inseparable.

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5 For an account of ‘peoplehood’ see Rogers M. Smith’s Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership (2003).
Why interdependence?

Interdependence builds on the assumption that linkages, not only separations, are important to understanding world politics. Common understandings of interdependence are, however, insufficient in the respect that they focus solely on intended effects and thus leave any externalities aside. Such unintended interdependencies, I suggest in this paper, prove more interesting to explore than to evaluate the successes of its intended outcomes. As such, I assess Keohane and Nye’s identification of a loophole that deserves further inquiry to be worthwhile still today, although I would make it more radical. What Keohane and Nye did was to take the at the time seeming externalities of world political analysis and ascribe them a status that made them worthwhile of inquiry. Building on Keohane and Nye, this is what I do today.

What proved radical with Keohane and Nye’s framework was they incorporated elements that had up until then been rendered analytically incompatible into the same analytical framework. That is to say that although mainstream versions of realism and liberalism had been taking form through dialectical process, Keohane and Nye took charge not of their opposing elements but of their commonalities. By doing this, they not only enabled a different reading of mainstream accounts of realism and liberalism, but also paved the way for alternatives to this mainstream. They illuminated three aspects in particular: that mainstream realism and liberalism share a rationalist foundation, that they are both centred on structural (whether anarchic or institutional) systemic features and that they both work within a paradigm whose delimitations are largely determined by conditions of military power. As such, the potential in Keohane and Nye’s account lies not in their suggested framework, but in the very description of the current state of the world at their time of writing and in the analytical implications that this had on their framework. Drawing on such analytical elements and applying them onto my analysis of politics today, I suggest that externalities today are the agents that work in the realm of non-institutional networks that remain silenced in Keohane and Nye’s original account.

What makes complex interdependence worthwhile, in spite of retrospectively seeming insufficiencies, is the problem that Keohane and Nye identify as their starting point, namely the increasing interdependencies of states that make economic means partially replace military ones because they are more cost effective and regimes are proven to be more viable alternatives for states than what the logic of self-help offers, because they provide them with crucial information that reduces the international-political risk that is costly to (attempt to) insure against (). Keohane and Nye’s account was ground breaking at the time it was formulated and it would be unfair to criticise it for not being radical enough in scope. It is, however, fair to say that its articulation against a realist understanding of interdependence makes it prone to adopting the dynamics that its authors set out to criticise rather than to create something novel by articulating their account apart from the logic it suggests should be altered. That is, Keohane and Nye make their account less radical that what would have been the case had they articulated it separately from realist interdependence. As such, I suggest, it is not realising its radical potential.
What was new in Keohane and Nye’s account was the partial shift from military to economic matters, the widening of both possible world-political actors (beyond states) and relations (beyond those between states) as well as the possibility that transnational interactions may generate outcomes of cooperation rather than conflict and the structural possibility that international institutions may tame prevailing anarchy (Moravcsik 2009:244). What goes missing here is, of course, anything that goes beyond institutionalised cooperation. While proxy conflicts in NEA seems to continue along the same logic, change is currently taking place elsewhere.

Conclusions

The foremost achievement of Power and Interdependence (1977) was to break with the supposed necessity to view the tragic wisdom of power-political rivalry and the teleological end of history as either/or options in any assessment of world politics as well as with the false autonomy that is invoked by both (). As well as to blur “the distinction between domestic and international politics” (1989:33-4). Or at least they raise these two problems (although their suggested solutions are not satisfactory in currently prevailing circumstances). Its integration of realism and liberalism/complex interdependence into one coherent framework, however, involves a number of analytical problems. The aim of this text was to explore possible alterations to Keohane and Nye’s account in light of current regional dynamics in NEA. What made regional dynamics pertinent to this endeavour is that research and practice alike on this region do fuse realism and liberalism in their practices and assessments. Unfortunately, Keohane and Nye formulate complex interdependence in response to a number of criticisms against mainstream realism (cf. 1989:25). This makes their account prone to following the same logic as that which they allegedly set out to contest. For, as Keohane and Nye themselves assert, “[o]ne could also imagine very different conditions” (1989:23). Keohane and Nye wrote in 1987:

[The analysis that we put forward in Power and Interdependence has not been rendered irrelevant by events. The real questions are not about obsolescence, but about analytical cogency (Keohane – Nye 1987:726).]

I articulate unintended interdependence as a way to further this endeavour.

References


