

## **Sovereignty Discourse in East Asia: Exploring Alternate sources of Legitimacy**

A Conference Paper for ISA Hong Kong 2017

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**Abstract:** Sovereignty, often a concept taken for granted in IR, typically focuses on the Weberian definition requiring the monopoly over the use of force within a territory. This is a traditional source of governmental legitimacy since time immemorial. However, the concept of liberal democracy, now firmly entrenched, challenges this form of legitimacy, creating competing discourses of legitimacy in the international system. Most modern states, rather than applying coercion in real time, rely on coercive force in mostly symbolic terms, presenting symbols of force as a means of demonstrating and signaling their legitimacy to the public. Therefore, sovereignty, or state government legitimacy, is a product of a discursive communicative act by the state that the public accepts as legitimate proof of their right to govern. Indeed, if we look at these states, many have expanded this discourse of legitimacy beyond the realm of security. Commonly in liberal democracies legitimacy is based on a balance between security and democratic freedom. Meanwhile, there is a third pillar of legitimacy that bears examination, that of economic welfare. States which offer security but also provide for the welfare of their citizens economically are able to enjoy a great deal of legitimacy while not offering much in the way of the freedom that is often connected with legitimacy in liberal democracies. This is evident currently in states such as Singapore, formerly in states such as South Korea, and perhaps China in the near future. This research will focus on the economic growth of these states, which also provides the populace with symbols that signal the legitimacy of the state. Given the role of China's rise as a model for many developing nation states, this article will conclude by discussing implications for the manner in which this third typology of legitimacy may influence the international system.

**Keywords:** sovereignty, East Asia, South Korea, Singapore, China, legitimacy, discourse, symbolism

*'Legitimacy is not something distinct from power; it is one of the vital sources of power. And if power shapes the nature and development of international orders, then the politics of legitimacy features prominently in the construction, maintenance and dissolution of such orders.'*

*Christian Reus-Smit*

## I. Introduction

We live in a time when Westphalian Sovereignty and norms, or Hobbesian form legitimacy of authority has been challenged by the onset of liberal democracy and driven by US dominance in the international system. In turn, this form of legitimacy is being challenged by states that have risen in prominence and power that derive their legitimacy from different sources. Once South Korea, now Singapore, and potentially China may look to economic growth as a source of legitimacy in the eyes of their respective populaces. This paper will first discuss traditional and current sources of legitimacy for sovereign states in the international system, then discuss how soft authoritarianism has raised the question of other sources of legitimacy that do not conform purely to the norms of either of the previous typologies. This paper will briefly examine South Korea, Singapore, and China to show how an alternate source legitimacy of authority, in this case economic legitimacy, may also serve to induce the people to comply, thereby contributing to making the authority legitimate and the state sovereign. Finally, the conclusion will deal with some questions that this discussion begs and the implications that may be drawn from it.

## II. Sovereignty: Traditional and Otherwise

In his review of Stephen Krasner's *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*, Bruce Cronin states:

'Few concepts in international relations have aroused as much debate and emotion among political leaders, activists, and scholars as that of sovereignty. Diplomats continually invoke it, transnational organizations attempt to circumvent it, and scholars debate its meaning and wonder whether globalization is making it obsolete. Yet, most accept the premise that sovereignty is not only the foundation of our international system but also one of the few consequential institutions we have in world politics.'<sup>1</sup>

There are many commonly held assumptions for sovereignty; Legal sovereignty typically refers to recognition by other states. Westphalian sovereignty refers to independence from interference by outside actors. Domestic sovereignty refers to the authority of the state to rule to the populace in that state's territory.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting that in spite of all this, sovereignty has only really been focused on in IR in the past 25 years.

This is not to say that the sovereign nation state played no role in previous scholarship. It is required for an international system to even exist.<sup>3</sup> Krasner discusses its role:

‘The sovereign state model is a basic concept for the major theoretical approaches to international relations, including neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism, for both of which it is an analytic assumption, and well as international society perspectives, for which it is a constitutive norm.’<sup>4</sup>

In realism, it is the response to the anarchical state of nature that Hobbes termed as a ‘Leviathan’. The nation state envisioned by Hobbes had the power to ensure that humans were no longer subject to the dangers of nature that resulted from ‘warre’. This power required of the state was a means of guaranteeing the lives, livelihood, and means of the people were not taken by others.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, a sovereign state must have adequate means of coercion at its disposal to ensure internal stability and rule of law while also appearing potent enough to dissuade would be external threats. In realists’ eyes, Hobbes was an advocate of powerful states and lacked any cosmopolitan leanings. For this reason, as Smit states ‘it is taken for granted that power is a material phenomenon; that a state’s power is determined, in some straightforward and unproblematic sense, by the material resources it commands.’<sup>6</sup>

This typically Weberian definition requiring the monopoly over the use of force within a territory is a traditional source of legitimacy for governmental authority since time immemorial. Hobbes believed that people acquiesced their personal sovereignty to a leviathan called a commonwealth or state that was entrusted with breaking the cycle of anarchy and interrupting the state of war for the individual.<sup>7</sup> The strength of the leviathan and the security it provided were ample reason for the individual to give up their personal sovereignty. After all, the constant threat of coercion entailed by ‘warre’ is hardly conducive to happiness or longevity. In this manner, Hobbes limited the demands placed on the leviathan to the security of the individual and viewed such demands as fair compensation for the leviathan to be able to make decisions for the individual, even those affecting their livelihood.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the provision of security entitles the state to some, or all, of an individual’s possessions or earnings. This is the simplest form of discourse in the market for security in nature that merely addresses the cause of the market which is a discourse of danger and coercion. Unfortunately, this definition may run the risk of essentialization and also has some problems in the interpretation of Hobbes.

In this regard, 2 important and often overlooked aspects of Leviathan should be noted. The first is that no state fights a constant battle against threats nor do they constantly parade their coercive capacity in front of the people. Rather, the coercive capacity of the state may be signalled at sufficient intervals through actual coercive action but the majority of the time it is symbolic. That is, it is signalled to the people by symbols or communicative acts that may include but are not limited to creating institutions that enact or represent the discourse or simply issuing public statements. The second point is that, while Hobbes acknowledged that there is no injustice in nature, the legitimacy of the state, or the ‘raison d’etre’ so to speak, is derived from securing the people’s lives and livelihoods which also implies that this doing this is just. Herein, these two points are put forth as cause to place the manner in which a state communicates its legitimacy in a position of primacy over anarchy as an explanatory variable for state behaviour.

This represents a significant departure from traditional IR views on anarchy and its importance. The basic concept of anarchy has been the foundation of international relations and has also been source of the nation state. Indeed, it is hard to imagine Western IR scholarship without the symbiosis of these two elements. However, while these conditions may suffice in describing the Westphalian system, they often come up short it adequately explaining other states or systems. Specifically, in the past there have

been other forms of state systems that were based on legitimacy that had sources other than strength of arms. The example of the Chinese centered hierarchical system comes to mind. Even today, in the US dominated international system, at least when convenient, the concept of legitimacy is less often associated with hard power and more often associated with liberal democratic governance and respect of international norms and institutions such as human rights and the UN.

The question of on-going salience of coercion centric state sovereignty in a globalized world has led some to call the death knell for state sovereignty as the world knows it and others to ponder a post-sovereign world.<sup>9</sup> Integration theorists claim that the EU relaxing and sharing of sovereignty is the key to international co-operation.<sup>10</sup> Others claim that the EU is destined to fail because state sovereignty is on the rise.<sup>11</sup> Others claim that a supranational citizenship may be the future under a democratic world authority.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, still others claim that sovereignty is alive and well.<sup>13</sup> However, this research argues that these ideas are relying on the aforementioned essentialized definition of sovereignty. In other words, a definition of a social phenomenon that says it is only “A” means that all things not “A” are by definition not that phenomenon even if the goal or the result is the same. However, Krasner argues that such a definition did not appreciate the realities of sovereignty and that such principles as legal and Westphalian sovereignty were often inconsistent and not representative of reality.<sup>14</sup> Krasner summarizes:

‘The now almost commonplace view that sovereignty is being eroded is historically myopic. Breaches of the sovereign state model have been an enduring characteristic of the international environment. The principle of autonomy has been violated in the name of norms including human rights, minority rights, democracy, communism, fiscal responsibility, and international security. Mutual recognition has not always gone to juridically independent territorial entities. There has never been some golden age of sovereignty. The sovereign state model has always been a cognitive script; its basic rules are widely understood but also frequently violated. Normative structures have been decoupled from actual behaviour either because actors embrace inconsistent norms such as human rights and non-intervention, or because logics of consequences driven by power and interest trump logics of appropriateness dictated by norms and principles.’

So not only is sovereignty not always what it has been claimed to be, it also suffers from not recognizing that domestic sovereignty influences how and why many of the inconsistencies above take place. Sovereignty based on coercive ability to protect people and their possessions which was exchanged for their giving up freedom and acquiescing to rule by that state could never be reconciled or equated with other agreements or exchanges that resulted in that same acquiescence. This influences legal sovereignty and therefore also Westphalian sovereignty. By never properly appreciating the flaws of the classic definition, there was no way theorists could have avoided the type of thinking that created their discussion in the first place.

However, sovereignty is not waning or eroding, at least not in terms of how it is defined herein. Of course, it is understandable that other scholars would argue that sovereignty is on the way out if the classic definition is applied. By defining sovereignty as a monopoly over force or ‘de jure’ sovereignty it becomes essentialized. Therefore, in any case where the authority of a state is defined in this manner, it may be presumed to be waning.

On the other hand, by viewing sovereignty as a practice of producing discourse authenticating legitimacy of the authority of the state, suddenly there are numerous ways to legitimize authority and these are often closely related to what other scholars would

call weakening effects on sovereignty. For example, international trade regimes and financial regulations are viewed as dividing and diffusing sovereignty, states no longer have full control over import taxes and tariffs or monetary policy. However, if a state authority bases a portion of its legitimacy on proper management of the economy and providing economic opportunity to its people, this may, in fact, strengthen sovereignty. These economic rewards enhance legitimacy. Beeson comments that 'erosion of state sovereignty may be compensated for by the expectation of enhanced economic development and capacity to shift the cost of adjustment in the new economic order onto other countries.' As sovereignty is viewed here as a practice or means of securing legitimacy and not an end, contrary to Beeson's claims of erosion, any practice that authenticates the discourse of the authority as being legitimate, including proper economic stewardship, is sovereignty. This is not a new idea. Tilly draws a clear connection between the role of not only coercion but also capital in the rise of the modern sovereign state.<sup>15</sup>

Sovereignty, as defined here is the 'production of a dominant discourse of legitimacy that authenticates the authority of the government of a nation state over a territory in the eyes of the populace of that territory.'<sup>16</sup> This is a departure from classic definitions of sovereignty which are closely tied to hard power. The 'monopoly over the use of force in a territory' definition leaves sovereignty a static pursuit or motivation for states rather than a dynamic concept that stands the test of time, or in this case, history. It has been shown time and again that hard power is not the only means of getting one's way and that legitimacy in the eyes of those who one is trying to influence is a much more efficient manner of achieving the goals of a government, both in terms of cost and effort.<sup>17</sup> Lake summarizes the constructivist view on sovereignty in saying:

'Thus, sovereignty is not exogenous to the system but produced through practice. Nor is it necessarily fixed or inviolable, although its status as a social fact does not imply that it is fluid and malleable either. Social facts are facts because they are basic premises upon which actors condition their behaviors; they are therefore enduring and hard to change. Nonetheless, recognizing that sovereignty and its relations forms-domestic hierarchy and international anarchy- are socially constructed potentially opens up new avenues for understanding international politics.'<sup>18</sup>

Therefore it is argued here that, as a practice of creating, there is no single path to being sovereign, as the authentication of the legitimacy of authority may be based on a coercive, freedom, or economic discourse, or, more often, a combination of these discourses. Wendt and Barnett, on the importance of ideas, argue that 'the most important structures in which states are embedded are made of ideas, not material forces.'<sup>19</sup> While the typologies of sovereignty are multiple, the end result of producing a legitimate nation state, at least in the eyes of most of the citizens thereof, is the same.

Therefore, the transition from a legitimacy of authority based on power to one based on liberal democratic ideals does not exclude the possibility of alternate sources of legitimacy. Lake describes sovereignty as a 'type of authority relationship'.<sup>20</sup> He notes that authority is a difficult to define concept that basically means one person wills another to follow them and that other person complies voluntarily. An interesting point of Lake is that he brings up 3 points of authority. First, he notes that power may be the foundation of authority but that authority does not rely upon the exercise of coercion. Authority, according to Lake can either rely on 'pure voluntarism or partial voluntarism where the coercive power of the authority lurks in the background, often prominently, but is not

often used'.<sup>21</sup> Second, authority is justified in many ways but the commands it issues need not be justified.<sup>22</sup> Finally, the third point Lake makes is that authority is never absolute because there will always be a command that an individual may choose not to comply with and defy.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, both Westphalian or liberal democratic legitimacy require the people to comply with the authority, thereby accepting the discourse of legitimacy the sovereignty is based upon. This opens the door for alternate forms of legitimacy based upon other discourses of legitimacy espousing different belief systems or criteria. First however, the transition towards democratic legitimacy should be understood in broad terms.

### III. Transition from Hobbesian to Liberal Democratic Legitimacy

The prevailing arguments for democratic transition have a decidedly normative bent. Often they are viewed as more legitimate or 'just' than the simple 'might is right' views of realists. This implies a fairness in society. In essence, the expectations of democratization can be described as a belief that democracies are more efficient at delivering public goods to the citizens in accordance with the social contract. In liberal democratic nation states the social contract is essentially renegotiated every time there is an election. The purpose of voting is to reaffirm popular support for the government's policies and its performance in enacting those policies. Should these policies fail to deliver public goods as efficiently as the sovereign (people) expects there is a likelihood that a different party will rise to power. Therefore, it may be said that a political party in power's ultimate goal is pleasing the citizens which enhances legitimacy and maintains its power by winning elections. However, it must also be recognized that maintaining a grip on power is the goal of all governments, not just democracies.

To examine the matter more closely one may read "The Social Contract", Jean Jacques Rousseau's treatise on government, which describes the implied agreement between a society and a government.<sup>24</sup> He describes how the people, as embodied by what he terms the sovereign, have a common will, in accordance to which, the affairs of government should be carried out. The main premise is that in return for being loyal citizens to the government, the government must guarantee the safety, freedoms, and economic opportunities that are necessary for the citizens to survive. Governments that do this well enjoy perceived legitimacy among the citizens because they fulfill the obligations of the social contract.<sup>25</sup> While many view this as a foundation for democracy, Rousseau does not directly imply that he is advocating democracy. In fact, he decries factionalism, special interest, and vote buying practices that have become a common, if frowned upon, feature of many modern democracies.<sup>26</sup> He claims that in a government, those who rule have the unenviable task of creating laws and as such should be an educated and wise class.<sup>27</sup> This does not necessarily narrow the type of governance down to one with universal franchise but possibly leaves the door open to other forms such as corporatism. Regardless, there is room for compromise beyond the social contract to which most democracies claim to adhere.

This idea is elaborated upon in a way by in John Rawls' "Law of the Peoples". Rawls argues that for the world to enjoy a Kantian perpetual Peace there should be an international "Society of Peoples" comprised of states of liberal peoples and decent peoples.<sup>28</sup> The states of liberal peoples form a group of what is commonly thought of as liberal democracies where human rights are respected and the governments are elected. However, more interestingly Rawls makes room for states that respect human rights but

do not allow their citizens to choose their government. These states of “decent peoples” are essentially decent because they satisfy the requirements of the social contract without consulting their citizens.<sup>29</sup> This type of government may be thought of as a type of corporatism whereby universal franchise is not the norm and those in power pursue policies for the benefit of society based on information they attain on their citizens wishes in an indirect manner. Such states may not satisfy the criteria to be liberal but by the very categorization as “decent” Rawls demonstrates that even liberal theorists can conceive of a form of government beyond democracy that is acceptable. Therefore, even Western philosophers of democracy and justice, often viewed as advocates for democratic transition, show an understanding that legitimacy need not be viewed only in terms of liberal democratic values, provided that the exercise of authority is not arbitrary and the needs of the people are well taken care of.

While many Western scholars would agree that the shift from a coercion based state discourse of legitimacy to a liberal justice based discourse legitimacy of state legitimacy this should not be viewed as a panacea for all the wrongs in the world. Indeed, defining sovereignty as a discourse opens the door to other ways of being sovereign, but it cannot be denied that dominant views on sovereignty and what makes a nation state sovereign have been conceived of by the West and used against the East. By choosing to embrace one form of legitimacy, be it based upon coercive or liberal democratic discourses, this system tends to ignore or even revile those states that do not conform to these prescriptive ideas of Western thought. And this is not simply a case of categorization. It has real world consequences for those states not meeting the standard imposed by the system. In the case of Westphalian Sovereignty, the hard power requirement meant that the lands ‘discovered’ in the ‘new world’ by Europeans had no legitimate form of governance and could be claimed for the monarchs of Europe as colonies. In the case of liberal democratic legitimacy, it means states may face sanctions or even armed intervention if they are judged to violate human rights and viewed as illegitimate. It would seem there is little room for alternate sources of legitimacy in the international system. This is the challenge faced both by scholars studying authoritarianism and the subjects of their studies themselves.

#### IV. Soft Authoritarianism

The fall of the Soviet Union was a time of the unabashed trumpeting of liberal democracy’s triumph over the communist system. With no viable alternative system to aspire to, when many authoritarian regimes were overthrown, “democratic” regimes were installed. These regimes were said to have found the path to democracy due to the efforts of opposition forces, external pressures, and the undeniable civilizing mission of democracy. However, it is interesting to note that, while the trumpets were still sounding, little effort was made to analyze the conditions of the regimes that had been overthrown in terms of party and state power or the means of coercion available to them.<sup>30</sup> Also, it is noteworthy that in their assessment of democratization, the mere presence of elections was enough to satisfy the Western states that took such satisfaction in the success of their chosen system of government.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, research done under a more sober lens, post post-Cold War euphoria, shows the manner in which these regimes “democratized” in a different light. Levitsky & Way summarize:

In many of the cases, regime outcomes were rooted less in the character of behavior of the opposition movements than the incumbent regimes ability to thwart them...successful opposition movements were often rooted in state and party weakness.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, previous attempts to understand transitional regimes failed to understand the role of the existing state apparatus in the transition. By only focusing on the one side they ignored important factors that would make true democratization difficult for these nascent would-be democracies. For instance, in many cases the mere presence of multi party elections in a state was touted as democracy while ignoring the uneven playing field faced by opposition parties. Instead, the parties in power consolidated control by encouraging the growth of institutions of parties in power and state, both deemed essential by democratic transition scholars to creating stable democracy. However, this growth of institutions was not intended by those in power as purely an effort for democratic stability. Rather, this institution building should not be viewed as dependent on the type of governance nor the stability created by strong parties and states. It is a key element of stability in all regime types.<sup>33</sup>

This blind spot created two problems. The first was the ignorance of the fact that the states which collapsed were weak in factors of stability and unlikely to truly democratize. The second was that strong states may transition to democracy but that the international environment had made it costly to be perceived as legitimate as authoritarian and hence the need to show signs of transition while protecting and maintaining the status quo societal power structures. This was abetted by research foci that, rather than an in depth examination of the democratization process, showed a bias towards “democratic performance and stability of democracy, such as constitutional design, executive-legislative relations, electoral and party systems, and voting behavior.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, if a state wished to be perceived as democratizing and legitimate, it had only to satisfy liberal democratic states by making cursory attempts at improvement in these areas.

Western democracy promotion strategies were markedly “electoralist” in that they focused on holding multiparty elections while often ignoring dimensions such as civil liberties.<sup>35</sup>

So many states made progress on strengthening the state and party in power while allowing other parties to compete in an unfair process by controlling the media, access to funding, and sometimes harassing or intimidating opposition. This process also demonstrated a transition from frowned upon high intensity coercion resorted to by authoritarian regimes towards low intensity coercion that attracted less negative publicity vis-à-vis the regimes’ legitimacy as perceived by other states. These so-called “competitive authoritarian regimes were hybrid democratic and authoritarian regimes. Often, they selectively pursued reform policies that fulfilled the dual role of appearing on the road to democracy while tightening the regime’s grasp on power.”<sup>36</sup>

## V. Legitimacy in East Asia: Philosophy and Practice

### a. Philosophy

Both in philosophical and practical terms, East Asia has had difficulty in conform to the expectations thrust upon it by either Hobbesian or Liberal Democratic Legitimacy. That is not to say that there was no conception of what is just and fair in East Asian philosophy or that there were no parallels with the philosophical underpinnings of

legitimacy mentioned earlier. In fact, there are a number of historical examples of domestic Chinese political philosophers that support both Rousseau and Rawls' arguments. Kuhn for example notes Wei Yuan and Feng Guifeng.<sup>37</sup> Wei argued that there should be broader political participation and competition among the literati elite but rather than limiting state power or transferring power from the state to the people he believed that this would reinforce state power.<sup>38</sup> Feng goes further by adapting some western political ideas in combination with older Chinese practice. The central ideas of Feng include that high ranking officials should be elected by lower ranking officials and bureaucratic control should be further extended in rural villages.<sup>39</sup> While both of these philosophers believed in wider political participation, it is interesting that in a similar fashion to Rousseau, they believed in a natural right of the educated elite to form the ruling class and would have abhorred a universal franchise beyond the educated.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to the more contemporary thoughts of Wei and Feng, one may even reach farther back to the Confucian philosophers for insight into Chinese political thought. Confucius and Mencius argued for rule by a virtuous king.<sup>41</sup> Rule by such a person would entail that he led by virtuous example and drew legitimacy from his moral authority. This in turn was verified by the manner in which he took care of his people and looked to provide for their needs. In such a case, the people would love their leader and rally to his side in times of hardship or war.<sup>42</sup> While neither Confucius nor Mencius could purport to have ever met such a leader, the ideal remained throughout the warring states period of China and is said to be the foundation for the "middle kingdom" tributary system where China provided for the security of neighbours in return for their acquiescence to its central leadership position in the system.<sup>43</sup>

While all these philosophers argue that there is a need for governments to provide public goods for their citizens, there is no mention of an absolute need for governments to be democratic. Rather, being accountable for the needs of the citizens will suffice. Nor is there any mention of the absolute need for liberal democratic ideals such as freedom of expression, press, or political assembly. Rather the governments' constant attention to the physical needs of the people is of greater importance. This is keyed upon in the conceptualization of soft authoritarianism" which may be seen as a type of corporatism that once could be identified in South Korea and now is typified by Singapore and, to a growing extent, China.<sup>44</sup> In practical terms, this corporatism is expressed as economic growth and has led to a fixation on GDP per capita among these states.

#### b. Economic Legitimacy

Beyond coercion which is the most basic source of state legitimacy, discourse of the legitimacy of authority may be viewed in terms of economic welfare. Even individuals whose motivation to acquiesce to an authority is based on coercion have an expectation that the security they receive will allow them to pursue their lives and secure the gains they may make from this endeavour. Therefore, it is rare to find a long-term coercive regime because there is less transparency and a tendency for these regimes to become corrupt or mismanage the economy.<sup>45</sup> Individuals that do not receive at least some economic benefit will tend to be dissatisfied with the arrangement and look to competing discourses. This line of logic falls in line with Zakaria's observation that both democratic and authoritarian regimes tend to be equally unstable without sufficient economic welfare for citizens while they also tend to be equally stable when the income level of the populace reaches a certain point.<sup>46</sup> In communist states, the way in which

an economy was managed and the way in which the gains divided was a prime factor of government legitimacy. In capitalist states as well, administrations are elected and fall based on how well they ensure the economy runs smoothly and they distribution of wealth is more or less fair. Economic development, while some may argue is outside the realm of politics, here it is argued that it plays an integral role in legitimacy in all states and as such the actions a state takes to manage the economy are also a discourse of legitimacy. Therefore, economic growth in terms of GDP per capita, while not the only measure of economic stewardship, may give a sense of how well the state authority is performing.

Both in terms of philosophy and practice we can see that there is a case to be made for soft authoritarian regimes' use of economic performance as their source of legitimacy. States enjoying such legitimacy somehow manage the economy and satisfy the people's material needs without explicit feedback from citizens' voting, instead using the market economy and the many forms of feedback therein to guide their economies. The next section will examine South Korea, Singapore and China in terms of GDP per capita growth as a source of legitimacy.

## VI. Economic Miracles?

When discussing East Asia there are many idioms and expressions that bely the economic importance of the region for the World. 'Asian Tigers', 'Miracle on the Han River', and 'China is the factory of the World' all come to mind in this regard. However, these expressions are not simply relevant for the rest of the world in terms of East Asia, they also speak to the focus on economic growth that has a place of primacy above all else in this region. In fact, when these countries fail to create a regional organization for co-operation like those that exist in Europe, Southeast Asia, or South America, it is often shrugged off with claims that the parties involved are still enjoy good trade volume. This preoccupation with economic growth would seem to show that, rather than a miracle, there was a concerted effort to bolster legitimacy through economic growth. This is a common thread which will be explored here through the cases of South Korea, Singapore and China.

### a. South Korea

Contrary to the modern and democratic South Korea that we see today, the nation that came out of the Korean War was in an unenviable position of economic weakness. The initiation of the 'Miracle on the Han River' began when Park Chung Hee won the presidency by election in 1963 and 1967. During this time, Park was able to normalize relations with Japan, the two sides agreeing on some \$8 billion in economic aid via grants, loans, and loans for private trust<sup>47</sup> that in conjunction with the nearly \$3 billion the US provided to South Korea, primed the South Korean economy for the so-called miracle and allowed Park to create the steel company Posco and embark on infrastructure projects.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, he ignored the rights and grievances of his people by rejecting Japan's offer to compensate victims of the colonial period directly, instead choosing to place the responsibility for citizens squarely on the shoulders of the South Korean government.<sup>49</sup> The rapid economic growth changed Korean society and saw the Saemauleul movement continue the eradication of agrarian Korean society through modernization.<sup>50</sup> While his time in office lasted some 18 years and saw many human rights violations, Park is viewed by many as the most important leader in Korean history.<sup>51</sup> While in many respects he continued the abuses of Syngman Rhee as a military

strongman, his vision for the economic development contributed to a nearly unimaginable improvement in the economic and material welfare of the South Korea populace. Hart-Landsberg argues that there were many issues and that the ‘miracle’ did not benefit many Korean people at the time and planted the seeds of dissident movements, historical memory of the period seems to feel differently.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, it is clear that the discourse of this period, while clearly still very coercive and lacking much content of political freedom, shows a definite shift from Syngman Rhee’s more coercive based legitimacy.

The shift in legitimacy is shown as South Korea’s economic fortunes have shown a constant upward slope. The result is that, even today, GDP per capita is seen as proof of the strength of the Korean nation. Meanwhile, South Korea has followed a trajectory that has been shared by many developmental states. First securing the nation with coercion, then developing economically while staying strong in the face of the North Korean threat and Cold War fears, and finally incorporating political and civil rights through democratization. In spite of Democratization, through constant economic development in South Korea there is even enough economic legitimacy to justify the authoritarian excesses of Park Chung-hee and rehabilitate his dictator image and legacy in the eyes of many South Koreans.<sup>53</sup> The economic legitimacy faced a challenge during the financial crisis in 1997 but was strong enough to survive this crisis and recover. This discourse was also central to the election of Park’s daughter who has paid much lip service to the economic successes of her father and used the nostalgia of the older generation for high economic growth levels to win votes.<sup>54</sup> Even in 2016, many indices of political freedom show a decline in South Korea and, until she was rocked by a recent scandal and impeached, few raising their voices in opposition on the hope that Park could revive the national economy.

#### b. Singapore

Singapore is one of the so-called Asian Tigers. It has the highest GDP per capita in East Asia based on an export logistics driven economy.<sup>55</sup> It enjoys high standard of living and education, considerable economic freedoms<sup>56</sup>, and a stable society. At the same time, politics are exclusively the realm of the ruling party. Vasu discusses the complexities of defining the governance of Singapore:

There are many descriptions of governance in Singapore. Some have characterized the country as a “paternalist state,” “developmental state,” “semi-authoritarian state,” an “electoral authoritarian regime,” and a “corporatist state.”..... More specifically, paternalism, semi-authoritarianism, and electoral authoritarianism focus chiefly on the authority of the state in governance. Paternalism is interested in the relationship between the state and its people en masse, while semi-authoritarianism and electoral authoritarianism are generally interested in the “less than democratic tactics” employed to control dissent and maintain authoritarian rule by “adorning it with greater legitimation.” As for the concept of the developmental state, the primary focus is the role of government (and government-linked corporations) in driving economic growth.

All of these descriptions involve a primacy of the party and state and there is little dissent to this fact. Therefore, by virtue of their complacency, it may be inferred that the people have tacitly given popular consent to the ruling party<sup>57</sup>, the PAP, based on the legitimacy of strong economic performance and social stability.<sup>58</sup> This is a function of the corporatist ideals laid out by Schwartzman:

. . . a harmonious, well-regulated, nonconflictual society, based on moral principles and well-defined norms which are issued and maintained by the public authority, the state. . . . There should be some intragroup autonomy and self-regulation, but *the very existence of groups and their relationships with each other are granted and regulated by the state.* . . .<sup>59</sup>

While the state does exercise considerable societal control, it must be noted that Singapore does have elections, whether they are free and fair is a point for debate. However, the dominance of the PAP in every parliamentary election ever held, including 70% of the vote in the last parliamentary election<sup>60</sup>, shows that there is overwhelming support for Singapore's leadership of Prime Ministers past and present, as well as their Presidents who are selected to run for president the Presidential Elections Committee who confer a "certificate of eligibility".<sup>61</sup> The criteria for such certificates are so stringent that candidates are only likely to come from the ruling elites. It should also be noted that, beyond being 'a person of integrity, good character, and reputation..', any candidate applying for a certificate of eligibility must also have experience as:

(a candidate) . . .has held for at least 3 years a cabinet ministerial post, headed a statutory board, or been a CEO of a company incorporated in Singapore worth over \$100 million in paid-up capital, or has equivalent management experience.<sup>62</sup>

This demonstrates the central focus of Singapore on proper stewardship of economic affairs as the domain of government. In addition, the fact that Singapore's head of government, the Prime Minister is not a democratically elected position shows that legitimacy need not be based on liberal democratic ideals.

### c. China

In terms of the social contract, or legitimacy in the eyes of the people, it must be considered what the people's expectations of the government are or rather "What does it take to satisfy them?" Interestingly, by showing that it is attempting to move towards a corporatist model of governance like that of Singapore the CCP has placed itself in a position to dictate the expectations of the people and how they will be satisfied. The CCP's official goals are a harmonious, well off society which lend themselves to the satisfying their social contractual obligations and the unofficial goal of maintaining one party rule. Of course, in terms of economics China's success is no secret and words like "rise" and "world's factory" are common. This means that the well-off aspect of the goal is currently on track even with some recent bumps in the road. Chinese economists will attest to this fact. On the other hand, how does China cope with the social changes that may coincide with economic progress? Yang and Stenig summarize the importance of continued economic growth and the challenges it presents:

The Chinese government is well aware of the consequences of the current "unbalanced, unsustainable, unstable, uncoordinated" development model. However, dealing with the problems is immensely complicated, for several reasons. Most fundamentally, the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party depends first and foremost on its ability to keep the economy developing at top speed. A decline in the rate of growth would create great disappointment not only to those who are still poor but, as well, to those who aspiring to even greater wealth than they have so far been able to achieve.<sup>63</sup>

To address this, China attempts to spur high economic growth with an export driven economy.<sup>64</sup> During the initial phases of economic reform, China focused on products where it had a comparative advantage of the value chain.<sup>65</sup> Gradually, it has managed to move up this chain and move into new high tech sectors. However, in a different manner from other high tech economies China does not devote as much resources to new product R&D, instead focusing on production chains and processes. Due to uncertainty of rapidly changing government economic reform policies and the structured uncertainty of the regional economies, China, while not particularly blessed in terms of traditionally conceptualized innovation, excels at process innovation. Breznitz and Murphree predict that this type of fast paced economy is sustainable for the medium term and thus China will continue to grow rapidly.<sup>66</sup> This functions to quell dissent by providing opportunities to the educated class.<sup>67</sup>

## VII. Implications

Economic development in East Asia, may act as an alternate source of legitimacy in East Asia that may allow authorities in those states that provide good economic guidance and GDP per capital growth to be seen as legitimate. Recent election results in the US may also lend anecdotal evidence to the idea that the people care about economic opportunity and the welfare of their families far more than political messages of virtue, democratic principles, and human rights. However, there are those who argue that this is a double-edged sword for those authorities that choose to pursue economic legitimacy. The danger lies in the argument that capitalism leads to democratization, a predication borne out by one of the cases herein.

If we look to South Korea, there may be reason for concern in Singapore and China. The economic growth of the Park Chung Hee era created growing middle class that gave birth to a political movement for democracy in the 1980s and triumphed in the face of brutal repression. However, it should be noted that in spite of democratization, candidates associated with the political elite from the authoritarian period continue to enjoy a great deal of popular support, winning 5 of 8 elections since democratization. This support is based partially on support for discourse expounding the threat of North Korea and Communism but primarily on the perception of the legitimacy these elites cultivated throughout South Korea's rapid economic rise and a nostalgia for those times. This shows that, even if the elites lose absolute power in a democratic transition, there is still the potential for a soft landing as a powerful political movement in the next incarnation of the state as a democracy. Therefore while, South Korea is a prototypical case of democratic transition where the state could no longer resist the people we should be careful to oversimplify this as the natural outcome of a contest between authoritarianism and democracy whereby the virtuousness of one viewpoint triumphed over another.

On the other hand, Singapore has shown that, if the economy is managed well, corruption kept low, and the people allowed to fairly and freely to pursue their livelihoods, a soft authoritarian regime can enjoy popular support and longevity. Furthermore, as the sociopolitical climate is one of strict control, Singapore is an outlier for those who assume wealthy societies are born of the twin track policy of liberal democratization and marketization. There is very little crime and the people of Singapore are not lacking for riches or freedom to pursue a better life. They have in essence exchanged their political

freedom for economic freedom. Therefore, it may be said that Singapore operates under a different social contract compared to a democracy but one in which popular consent is based continued satisfaction with the aforementioned economic freedom.

The cases of South Korea and Singapore give two potential outcomes for China, which as a massive economy and country engenders a great deal of speculation. One aspect that gives rise to speculation on democratization in China is the rise of a middle class. Hu predicts that China will become a middle class society by 2020<sup>68</sup>, In terms of democratic transition this rise of a middle class is supposed to create instability in authoritarian regimes. Tang explains:

In particular, scholars believe that economic development destabilizes an authoritarian regime by nurturing a politically autonomous and empowered middle class. Presumably, this class does not sit well with authoritarianism and tends to make demands for greater political participation. In the modernization theory, the expansion and strengthening of the middle class tilt the balance of power towards pro-democracy forces. In the structural functionalist conception of the modernization theory, if an agent is needed for the structural re-juxtaposition between a modern society and a democratic polity, the middle class is that agent. In a nutshell, economic development transforms social environment that gives rise to the middle class; democratization entails a political arrangement that corresponds with the interest of the middle class.<sup>69</sup>

However, as investigated by Zhang, the middle class that is formed by this economic success is engaged in the pursuit of status by conspicuous consumerism.<sup>70</sup> This consumerism further drives the domestic economy and provides a distraction from political activism.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, rather than finding their political voice as members of the middle class, they are preoccupied with status and materialism. Furthermore, feeling that this luxurious life to which they have become accustomed is dependent on the state and knowing that challenging the status quo could jeopardize all this, as with many late developers, the middle class in China is reluctant to challenge the existing political arrangement.<sup>72</sup> Research by Chen and Dickson has shown that rather than providing the impetus of democratization, Chinese professionals, owing their financial success to state policy, are largely in favour of those policies and the CCP.<sup>73</sup> Tang's analysis confirms that, while statistically China's middle class is more interested in Politics than other classes, it is equally unlikely as other classes to challenge the government or resort to political activism.<sup>74</sup>

Of course, as there is little comparison in terms of GDP per capita with Singapore, China's ability to maintain this momentum is dependent on continued growth which, given the size of its economy and its population may or may not be sustainable. Recent drives to stamp out corruption show that the CCP is concerned with its image in the peoples eyes. China has adapted many policies and means of quelling dissent for both authoritarian and democratic regimes. These include legalization, demonstrations, bureaucracy, and propaganda and are all meant to reinforce the public image of legitimacy of CPP rule in China. These adoptions are meant to stabilize the regime and mitigate destabilizing influences created by economic growth related societal change. In spite of the CCPs success in co-opting the middle class to prevent the seeds of democracy from sprouting, there are still the masses of Chinese who are not included in this portion of society. This creates the challenge of dealing with those who can see the growing disparity in income which creates polarizing influences in society. The CCP must still

adapt grapple with this and is working on expanding its influence and penetration to the lowest levels of society.<sup>75</sup>

### VIII. Conclusion

This discussion has shown that, rather than a normative focus on authoritarian regimes that stresses how they can “progress” towards democratization, there is a need for a more objective lens that investigates how they provide for their citizens. South Korea may be a prototypical case of democratic transition where the state could no longer resist the people’s desire for a voice in their governance. However, we should be careful to oversimplify this as the natural outcome of a contest whereby the virtuousness democracy of one viewpoint triumphed over the evils of authoritarianism. The presence of the former elites in South Korea democracy and the continued salience of their message of economic legitimacy should not be ignored. Indeed, this message led to the election of 5 sovereign South Korean governments. This shows that there is room for repressive ideas in a democratic society and benevolence in an authoritarian society. Fukuyama pursues this line of thought:

As a matter of common sense, most people would allow for the possibility of benevolent dictatorship. There is a clear moral distinction between Singapore under Lee Kuan Yew, for example, and the predatory rule of Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire or Kim Jong-Il in North Korea. Yet contemporary comparative politics has largely lost sight of the Aristotelian distinction between kingship and tyranny, and has no good way of categorizing nondemocratic regimes that nonetheless can be said to serve a broader public interest.<sup>76</sup>

It should also be noted that while China, and Singapore, may be termed authoritarian, they allow a great deal of freedom in terms of economic opportunity. There is freedom to choose one’s job, childrens’ education, and cultural or entertainment possibilities.<sup>77</sup> This begs the question of how important to a person’s day to day life is freedom of political participation? No matter how this question is addressed, it may be necessary to concede or accept the place of decent states in the world and that China, by following the example of Singapore in aggressively pursuing economic growth and maintaining its hold over a rapidly globalizing society through effective bureaucratic controls, the legal system, and propaganda, may be on its way to becoming one.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Cronin. Book Review of *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* by Stephen Krasner, *American Political Science Review*, Vol 95, No.1 pp.261-262

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Allan James. *The Practice of Sovereign Statehood in Contemporary International Society*, *Political Studies* XLVII (1999), 457-473, p.468

<sup>4</sup> Stephen D. Krasner. Rethinking the sovereign state model, *Review of International Studies*. 27 (2001), p. 20-29

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hobbes (1968)

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<sup>6</sup> Christian Reus Smit (2014), 341-359

<sup>7</sup> Hobbes, Thomas, and Richard Tuck. "Leviathan. Cambridge texts in the history of political thought." *New York: Cambridge University Press* (1991)., p.92

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.125

<sup>9</sup> See Richard Rosencrance. "The rise of the trading state: Commerce and consequence in the modern world." (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p.214; Mark Beeson. "Sovereignty under siege: globalisation and the state in Southeast Asia." *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (2003), 357-374

<sup>10</sup> Philpott suggests that if 'ideas were a crucial source of the system of sovereign states, they could well be the source of contemporary trends and the expansion of the European Union.' Daniel Philpott (2000) p. 245. Krasner also believes that the EU is a model only for Europe given certain characteristics difficult to replicate elsewhere. Stephen Krasner (2001), p.29

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Wendt (1992)

<sup>12</sup> David Held. *Democracy and the global order: From the modern state to cosmopolitan governance*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995)

<sup>13</sup> While Krasner argues that sovereignty, while never as strong as many assumed, is in no danger of disappearing since state control by authorities is still dominant in social life and some forces of globalization may in fact increase state control. Stephen Krasner. *Sovereignty*. *Foreign Policy: Jan/Feb*; 122 (2001), p.17-42, p.20

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Krasner (2001), p.17-42

<sup>15</sup> Charles Tilly. "Capital, Coercion and European States." (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell 1990)

<sup>16</sup> Reus Smit makes the connection between state power and legitimacy in saying, 'Most importantly, power is the product not merely of material capabilities, but also of nonmaterial factors, of which legitimacy is crucial: the social perception that an actor its plans and objectives, and its actions are rightful.' Christian Reus Smit (2014) Even a military strategist like Clausewitz discusses the need for the people to believe in the motives of the military and state in order to complete the holy trinity and wage total war. Carl von Clausewitz (2008)

<sup>17</sup> Reus Smit lists among the pitfalls of coercive power its high cost, need for repetition, ongoing need for bribery, and the changing interests of the individual. Christian Reus Smit (2014) p. 346

<sup>18</sup> David Lake. The New Sovereignty in International Relations, *International Studies Review*, 5 (2003), p. 303-323

<sup>19</sup> Alexander Wendt, and Michael Barnett. "Dependent state formation and Third World militarization." *Review of International Studies* 19, no. 04 (1993), 321-347, p.309

<sup>20</sup> Lake, David A. "The new sovereignty in international relations." *International studies review* 5, no. 3 (2003): 303-323., p.304

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Lake's second point shares much in common with Agamben's discussion and explanation of Schmitt's state of exception as 'the sovereign, having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law.' Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.305

<sup>24</sup> Rousseau, Jean-Jacques A. "The Social Contract." Translated by GDH Cole. *Mineola, NY*, 2003., p. 21

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 40

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 44

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 25

<sup>28</sup> Rawls, John. *The law of peoples: with, the idea of public reason revisited*. Harvard University Press, 2001., p. 54

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 61

<sup>30</sup> Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the cold war*. Cambridge University Press, 2010., p. 54

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p 42

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 25

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p 27

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- <sup>35</sup> Ibid. p 42
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid. p 57
- <sup>37</sup> Kuhn, Philip A. *Origins of the modern Chinese state*. Stanford University Press, 2002. p. 19
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid. p.48
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 65
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 61
- <sup>41</sup> Bell, Daniel A. 2. Just War and Confucianism: Implications for the Contemporary World. In *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context*. Princeton University Press. 2006. pp. 23-51., p. 26
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid. p.29
- <sup>43</sup> Moon, Chung-In, and Chaesung Chun. "Sovereignty: Dominance of the Westphalian concept and implications for regional security." *Asian security order: Instrumental and normative features* (2003): 106-137., p.136
- <sup>44</sup> Roy, Denny. "Singapore, China, and the " Soft Authoritarian" Challenge." *Asian Survey* 34, no. 3 (1994): 231-242., p. 234
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- <sup>49</sup> Jonsson, Gabriel. "Can the Japan-Korea Dispute on " Comfort Women" be Resolved?." *Korea Observer* 46, no. 3 (2015): 489., p.494
- <sup>50</sup> Yi, Pyŏng-ch'ŏn. *Developmental dictatorship and the Park Chung-Hee Era: The shaping of modernity in the Republic of Korea*. Homa & Sekey Books, 2006., p.176
- <sup>51</sup> Kang, WooJin. "Democratic performance and Park Chung-hee nostalgia in Korean democracy." *Asian Perspective* 40, no. 1 (2016): 51-78., p.52
- <sup>52</sup> Hart-Landsberg, Martin. "South Korea: The " Miracle" Rejected." *Critical Sociology* 15, no. 3 (1988): 29-51., p. 41
- <sup>53</sup> Kang (2016), 51-78, p.52
- <sup>54</sup> Kim, Jasper. *Crisis and change: South Korea in a post-1997 new era*. Ewha Womans University Press, 2005., p.131
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid. p. 155
- <sup>56</sup> "The Index of Economic Freedom shows that in comparison, Singapore's economy is quite free. The index is calculated annually by the Heritage Foundation and the Wall Street Journal, which is "grounded in classical economic theories of Adam Smith and Friedrich Hayek", thus making it a "time tested formula for sustained economic growth". 34 The index surveys 180 countries and gives them a rating based on 10 dimensions of economic freedom. It then divides the countries into five categories, ranging from 'free' to 'repressed'. The highest ranking countries are Hong Kong and Singapore, neither of which are democracies: clearly demonstrating that economic freedom and political freedom are not the same thing." (Gittens and Tiffen 2009) p.235
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- <sup>58</sup> Kim 2005. p. 163
- <sup>59</sup> Schwartzman, Simon. "Back to Weber: corporatism and patrimonialism in the seventies." *Authoritarianism and corporatism in Latin America* (1977): 89-106. p. 91
- <sup>60</sup> Janice Heng, Straits Times, September 12, 2015, "For PAP the Numbers Hark Back to the 2001 Polls", <https://web.archive.org/web/20150912094804/http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/for-pap-the-numbers-hark-back-to-2001-polls-showing>. Accessed June 12, 2017

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- <sup>70</sup> Zhang, Li. *In Search of Paradise: Middle Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis*. Cornell University Press, 2010.p. 9
- <sup>71</sup> Shlapentokh, D. "Post-Mao China: An alternative to "The End of History"?" *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 35, 2002: 237-268., p.247
- <sup>72</sup> Tang 2011, p. 375
- <sup>73</sup> Chen & Dickson 2010, p.160
- <sup>74</sup> Tang 2011, p. 383
- <sup>75</sup> Fukuyama, Francis. "China and East Asian Democracy." *Journal of Democracy*, 2012: 14-26., p.20
- <sup>76</sup> Fukuyama 2012, p.18
- <sup>77</sup> Brady, Anne-Marie. *Marketing Dictatorship*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2009., p. 187