



# Securing the seas, securing the state: Hope, danger and the politics of order in the Asia-Pacific



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## ABSTRACT

More than 'regional integration', the 'power shift' towards China and 'Asia' has come to dominate the debates about the Asia-Pacific and global order. As the maritime sphere is the centre stage on which this shift unfolds, East Asian seas have become highly dangerous and divisive in the minds of politicians, bureaucrats and scholars alike. Therefore, analysing international politics through the prism of maritime politics enables us to gain deeper understanding of how socio-economic change such as it undergirds the 'rise of China' alters political orders. The perspective including two of China's closest neighbours, Japan and South Korea, is particularly useful for transcending the limiting frames of conventional theorizing. Discourse analysis of maritime politics reveals how governments have stepped up their efforts to secure or 'stabilize' the moving boundaries of the current political order. This happened through the production of danger and concomitant disciplining of thinking about acceptable alternates to that order in three dimensions. First, East Asian seas are seen as borderlands between the civilized modern society and uncivilized wild nature, to be developed. Second, the seas coincide with the political boundaries among China, Japan and South Korea and their safeguarding is imperative for the preservation of official narratives of national unity. Third, the delineation between 'East' and 'West' that cuts across the ocean makes East Asian seas borderlands among civilizations to be secured. This understanding of change suggests that the future of order depends much more on governments' ability to reconstitute their states' social bases than the current debates of power shift and regionalism acknowledge.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Starting with the rise of 'Japan Inc.' in the 1980s, followed by the 'Small (Asian) Tigers' of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan in the 1990s, and most recently propelled by the 'rise of China', East Asia has frequently been portrayed as one of if not the most dynamic and economically promising regions of the world. Notions of the Asia-Pacific Century and the Asian Century, as well as predictions that the impending superpower China will co-manage the world with the United States in a G-2 arrangement, demonstrate that developments in Northeast Asia are perceived as altering global order. With a focus on the Asia-Pacific that is primarily a reference to the interaction between the bigger East Asian countries and the United States, the debate has evolved in two competing strands. The discourse of regionalism emphasizes the expansion of transnational flows and connections that prompt the strengthening of political ties. The discourse of power shift, with

particular reference to the People's Republic of China, emphasizes relative changes in the growth of both national economies and the equipment of armed forces. As a consequence of the latter gaining hegemonic status, a wide range of phenomena is attributed to the effects of power shift. Evidence that points to the uncertain future of the linear rise of China and flaws in the mechanics of shifting balances of power among modern states tends to be addressed in passing. The separation of domestic from international and economic from security political realms makes it difficult to look beyond the horizon of post-WWII era order without emphasizing the very boundaries that shall be transcended. Thus, the analysis of state legitimacy through the lens of maritime politics helps to overcome some of these barriers in the debate about the future of order. Maritime politics can serve as a mirror for how political communities are constituted, how state-based order is being legitimized, and how this order may or may not be changing.

The maritime sphere is the centre stage on which the 'power shift' unfolds. The shift's dangerous consequences have, ostensibly, first and foremost manifested themselves in the form of maritime security threats. On the largest scale, geopolitical debates revolve around how the United States with its allies seeks to maintain stability in East Asia while securing worldwide shipping routes in the face of a rising China. Meanwhile disputes over the delimitation of

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territorial sovereignty, compounded by the scramble for natural resources through extending exclusive economic zones (EEZ), accentuate the maritime sphere as an arena for struggles among states. In the minds of politicians, bureaucrats and students of international politics, East Asian seas have come to be seen most divisive. This is puzzling because these seas connect societies through dense networks of shipping lines and undersea cables, without which economic growth and the use of internet-based communication systems are unthinkable, in Northeast Asia in particular. Even though governmental and non-governmental actors have been cooperating in fishery management through series of gradually adjusted bilateral agreements, even though specialized bureaucrats have been trying to set up frameworks for environmental governance, and even though defense officials attempted to advance a variety of confidence building measures, severe financial shortages, nationalist opposition and geopolitical imperatives have consistently thwarted substantial cooperation in the so-called traditional and non-traditional security affairs (Manicom, 2014; Wirth, 2011, 2012). Driven mainly by naval arms build-up, 'Asia' is being 'increasingly militarised' (International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), 2012, p. 205). This begs the questions why and how, in the era of deepening socio-economic interdependence, with major wars several generations past and even the Cold War over for more than two decades, the maritime sphere has become militarized again. Conversely, why are the connecting elements of the seas and the ocean as an ecological system in its own right absent from the mainstream discourses of the future of East Asian and Asia-Pacific regional orders?

I argue that the re-militarization of East Asian seas in the post-Cold War period is best understood through the perspective of state legitimation. The need for political legitimation gains salience in times of rapid socio-economic change, change that challenges long-held beliefs and undermines the *raison d'être* of established institutions. Because power is 'the ability to afford not to learn' (Deutsch, 1966, p. 111), hierarchical political systems, which operated so successfully under the relatively stable conditions of the postwar growth period, are particularly prone to falling into legitimation crises once socio-economic foundations alter (Habermas, 1975; Reus-Smit, 2007). Beyond what the power shift and regionalism discourses suggest, it is not just the hierarchy among state units and their increasing interdependence, but the societal, national and civilizational dimensions of the contemporary order that are transforming. These are the changes that state governments, the currently most powerful political actors, are seeking to cope with by securing or 'stabilising' existing ideational and institutional structures. The phenomenon becomes particularly apparent in the production of danger, that is, the mutual construction of various threats to the state from the maritime sphere. This danger forms three major ideational lines of separation, or boundaries, which constitute the current order based on modern ideals of the state.

First, the ocean became one of the final frontiers of development and progress. It is, therefore, a borderland between civilized modern society and uncivilized wild nature. Second, the maritime sphere coincides with the political boundaries among the modern nation-states of China, Japan and South Korea. Moreover, there exists a third delineation that cuts across the maritime sphere. It is in most general terms the one between 'East' and 'West'. This makes East Asian seas also borderlands in terms of the civilizational metageography. An understanding of the nature of change along these three fault lines or boundaries suggests that the future of order depends much more on governments' ability to reconstitute their states' social bases by fostering societal cohesion and their ability to lead the search for a post-developmental national purpose than the current debates of power shift and regionalism acknowledge.

The argument unfolds as follows. In the first section I consider how development and security expressed in discourses of danger, by way of delineating political communities and disciplining their members, legitimize the current state-based order. In the subsequent three sections I discuss boundary constructions as they define modern industrial society, nation and civilization, respectively. In the conclusion I suggest that this shift of boundaries requires us to think harder about fundamental questions of how to revitalize societies and how to re-legitimize political communities other than through top-down engineered strategies of *national* economic development if we want to improve our understanding of the future of order.

This article adopts a perspective centred on China and two of its closest neighbours; Japan and South Korea – in the following also referred to as Northeast Asia. This vantage point enables the study to transcend the common dichotomies of democratic and non-democratic regimes, rising and declining powers, and developing and developed countries that obfuscate current debates of order. Even though China, Japan and South Korea followed parallel rather than common paths during the Cold War period, their elites sequentially adopted similar developmental visions and models. The consequences of these national modernization projects are now manifest in converging social and political problems, such that the analysis of how the three governments seek to secure the seas offers new insights into how they attempt to secure the state. The same phenomenon is, *in extremis*, observable in North Korea. Yet, the lack of space prevents the extension of the present discussion to North Korean and also Taiwanese politics, as well as Japan's policies towards the Russian Far East. The increasing urge to reinforce some but not other boundaries of the postwar order tells us much about the nature of the current transition and its potential global ramifications. At the same time, this article's deconstruction of the rather narrow (maritime) security discourse in the Asia-Pacific contributes to research on the production and reproduction of state power through particular scalar processes (Mansfield, 2001).

### Orders, boundaries, and the legitimizing effects of danger

Debates about the future of order in the Asia-Pacific remain largely insulated from the broader research agenda on how socio-economic change affects political systems. It is widely accepted that governments must respond to power shift with various policies ranging from 'engagement' to 'hedging', and 'hard balancing' with the help of allies (Ikenberry, 2007; Swaine, 2011). Scholarship that emphasizes increasingly dense networks among political and business elites (Acharya, 2009; Johnston, 2008), because of its focus on foreign political ideas, tends to take the state as given and essentially skirts the question of deeper political change, too. Notable exceptions are Katzenstein's (2005, 2012) studies of porous regionalism and processes of sinicization and Callahan's (2004) ethnographic analysis of Greater China that deconstruct rigid conceptions of the Chinese nation and civilization. Despite that the power shift and regionalism discourses arose from the monumental transformation of societies at hand static images of the state prevail.

These debates neglect that states remain the basis for stable political orders only as long as common purpose and delineation between citizen and foreigners expressed in narratives of national history maintain their strength in unifying nation and state (Hobsbawm, 1990), and as long as these states are recognized as legitimate actors in the international realm. States' concomitant reliance on practices of separating inside from outside 'requires an emphasis on the unfinished and endangered nature of the world' (Campbell, 1992, p. 54). In Northeast Asia, this danger came in the form of social and political fragmentation, weak governments and economic underdevelopment. These generated the imperative and

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