Asymmetry and International Relationships

Power is real, but it does not always prevail. This book explores how disparity structures international relationships. Beginning at the bilateral level, the relationship between the smaller side and the larger side can be normal as long as the smaller does not feel threatened and the larger can assume that its capabilities are respected. However, the smaller can be tempted to brinksmanship, while the larger can be tempted to bully. Asymmetric conflicts are often stalemated because the limited commitment of the larger side is met by the smaller's mortal resistance. In multilateral situations, asymmetry shapes patterns of uncertainty and attention. In global systems, how hegemons treat their subjects is the unobserved sand shifting beneath their feet as they look toward their challenger. Since 2008, the United States has retained primacy but not dominance. The management of asymmetric relationships in a multinodal world will determine how power matters in the current era.

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Preface

The ideas for this book began as reflections on the mutual misperceptions of China and Vietnam, then evolved into an analysis of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship and further into China's asymmetric relationships with all its neighbours. As my Asia-focused research progressed, however, it seemed to me that while asymmetric relationships had not received much attention in international relations theory, managing the relationships of large and small states is a general and increasingly more important problem. Hence this book.

MISPERCEPTION

Back to the beginnings. Since 1985, in the middle of their decade-long hostility, I have been talking to China experts in Vietnam and to Vietnam experts in China, and I have a deep respect for both sides. Sometimes I would fly via Bangkok from Hanoi to Beijing. The discussions of the same current events were worlds apart. It was not just a question of one side versus the other side, but rather both sides looking at one reality and seeing two very different phenomena.

For example, on a hot summer day in Hanoi, young researchers at the Institute of International Relations (now the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam) told me that Chinese border authorities were forcing the pregnant Vietnamese brides of Chinese farmers back across the border. Their theory was that China was trying to infiltrate Vietnam with its seed. Of course, they knew the details better than I did. That was their business, and China was only a hundred miles away. But they had not considered the more likely explanation that birth quotas were rigidly imposed on all Chinese villages and that foreign women were the most vulnerable. The Vietnamese analysts typically viewed Chinese actions that affected Vietnam as targeted and coordinated, while in fact many were haphazard products of different localities and organizations.

The researchers were connecting dots that were in fact not connected and were coming up with darkly clever and hidden schemes. The head of the China section of the Institute put it succinctly. He said, "Professor Womack, you Americans have been dealing with China for what, two hundred years? We Vietnamese have been dealing with China for five thousand years. And if there is one thing that we have learned that you should know, it is that China is – inscrutable!"

By contrast, China found Vietnam all too scrutable. Vietnam's ingratitude could be accounted for by a national character flaw: "anyone with milk is their mother." But grand strategy explained hostility toward China. Later that same week, a scholar from National Defence University in Beijing told me that the reason for hostility between China and Vietnam was the Soviet attempt to encircle China. The Soviet Union required Vietnam to invade Cambodia, and Vietnam colluded as a junior partner in sandwiching China so that it could establish its small hegemony over Indochina and perhaps beyond. The attacks of the Khmer Rouge on Vietnamese villages and Pol Pot's visceral hatred of Vietnam were of no consequence. Vietnam was playing a game of global strategy, and China was the opponent.

The difference between the two sides was not their justifications for their respective positions, but rather their perspectives on the interaction. I was a third-party observer with less-detailed information than either side, and yet I was confident that they were both wrong. Moreover, their misinterpretations had a certain complementarity. The Vietnamese were viewing China as if China were Vietnam writ large – just as fixated on the relationship as the Vietnamese were. The Chinese were viewing Vietnam as China writ small – a state driven by grand strategic considerations. It was not a question of an intelligence deficit in any sense. Both sides were smart, and they had more data than anyone else.

The mutual misperception was structural. Vietnam was more exposed in the relationship, and therefore it was more attentive and anxious. China was less exposed and had more important relationships to worry about. Each tended to interpret the other as a version of itself, plus or minus capabilities, while in fact the relationship was a composite of two very different interactions – Vietnam to China and China to Vietnam. Because the misinterpretations were structural rather than accidental, they tended to amplify one another. Thus their descent into war in the late 1970s could be viewed as a vicious circle of asymmetric misinterpretations. Moreover, at the same time that Vietnam was playing out the role of anxious smaller power with China, it was acting as an inattentive larger power in its relationship with Cambodia.[1]

[1] Brantly Womack, "Asymmetry and Systemic Misperception: The Cases of China, Vietnam and Cambodia during the 1970s." *Journal of Strategic Studies* **26**:2 (June, 2003), pp. 91–118.

CHINA AND VIETNAM

As China and Vietnam normalized their relationship in the 1990s, new dimensions of asymmetry became apparent to me. First, while structural misperception might cause hostility, hostility did not last forever. If asymmetry simply produced hostility, then there was no hope for Sino-Vietnamese relations. But in fact China and Vietnam reached a stalemate by 1985, and over the next six years they gradually moved to a cold, formal normalization followed by ten years of thickening relations. Neither side had won. China had not been able to "teach Vietnam a lesson," and Vietnam had to recognize that the isolation caused by its occupation of Cambodia was not worth the gain. From this stalemate slowly arose mutual accommodation. Because neither could win, time was on no one's side.

Second, asymmetry continued to dominate the relationship even after hostility ended. The greater exposure of the weaker side was true in every aspect of the relationship, from trade to tourism. Even with the new normalcy, Vietnam remained the cautious and anxious partner while China pushed for greater openness. This was not simply a matter of inertial hostility. If Vietnam imported electric fans from China it was only a small expansion of China's market, but better and cheaper fans could wipe out Vietnam's whole industry. When Vietnamese conical hats became a fad in China, it was a major opportunity for Vietnam but it did not threaten the Chinese hat industry.

My conclusions were that despite misperception, asymmetric relationships were resilient, and that despite normalcy, there remained asymmetric exposure in the relationship that had to be managed. Asymmetry was more than a pathology. There was no better opportunity to study the whole range of asymmetric relationships and their variation over time than to study the thousands of years of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship, and that became my next major project.[2] From the establishment of Vietnam's de facto independence at the beginning of the Song dynasty in mid-tenth century to the arrival of the French 1,000 years later, the relationship remained asymmetric, and the border between the two was basically stable. The major exception was especially interesting. In 1407, the Ming Dynasty reannexed Vietnam, only to be defeated twenty years later. But it was after the defeat of the Ming had confirmed Vietnam's autonomy that Vietnam's golden age of Confucianism could begin, and the relationship was basically stable for the next 500 years. The modern era provided new lessons in asymmetry. The oppression of the West brought the revolutionary forces of China and Vietnam together in a fraternity of resistance that could be intimate because they both faced a stronger enemy. For the first time, they stood shoulder to shoulder rather than face to face. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China's role gradually

[2] Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

shifted from big brother back to threatening neighbor, while Vietnam's hubris after reunification led it to illusions of victory. The sobering stalemate of the 1980s was followed by the mutually beneficial but still problematic normalcy of the present era.

CHINA AS THE SOLID CENTER OF EAST ASIA

Clearly, Vietnam was not China's only asymmetric relationship, and the traditional rituals of the tribute system could be reinterpreted as a general mechanism for the management of premodern asymmetry in East Asia. These thoughts required a more general study of Chinese diplomatic history, and fundamental differences between the East Asian experience of international relations and that of the West became apparent. As David Kang has argued, in contrast to the competitive wars of empires and states in the West, China occupied a central position in Asia that provided a more stable international environment.[3] But why, and what kind of environment? Here the research of Wang Gungwu and the criticisms of Evelyn Rawski were particularly useful to me. Wang showed that the Song dynasty was quite realistic about the limits of its military capabilities and the need to manage its relations with its periphery rather than to force them.[4] The rituals of the tribute system could be seen as an exchange of central acknowledgment of autonomy for signs of deference from neighbors.

But China was not always the strongest power. As Evelyn Rawski and her colleagues of the new Qing history approach demonstrate, the empire was often one contender among many on the northern border, and sometimes not the strongest.[5] Indeed, China was often in chaos, and the Yuan and Qing dynasties were conquest dynasties ruled by non-Han peoples. China was not always the regional hegemon.

Nevertheless, China was always East Asia's regional center of population and productivity. Though it was not always Asia's hegemon, until the modern era China was always Asia's solid center. With the Great Wall it became, in effect, the world's first gated community. Its prosperity did not require limitless conquest but rather effective defense, and the most effective defense was deferential neighbors. The situation in the West was fundamentally different. There, the middle of the earth was the "Medi-terranean"; the "Middle of the Earth" was a liquid center that from earliest times attracted competition around its shores and adventure and colonization across its waters.

[3] David Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

[4] Wang Gungwu, "Early Ming Relations with Southeast Asia," in John K. Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 34–62

[5] Evelyn Rawski, "Chinese Strategy and Security Issues in Historical Perspective," in Brantly Womack (ed.), *China's Rise in Historical Perspective* (Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), pp. 63–88.

The Atlantic became the Mediterranean of the modern era, and eventually Britain, the ultimate liquid power, confronted and broke the self-isolated continentalism of the Qing.[6]

BEYOND CHINA

Certainly the Mediterranean and later the world experience of great power competition explained the focus of Western thought on conflict and hegemony in international relations, but did the East Asian experience of asymmetric management have any broader relevance? Perhaps in the modern era, East Asian history was not even relevant to itself. But asymmetric relationships were everywhere – between the United States and Canada, or Cuba, or Mexico. Between Mexico and Guatemala. Between Germany and Austria. Between South Africa and Angola. Did the disparity of capabilities lead generally to structurally different exposures, perspectives, perceptions, and misperceptions? Were there generically similar problems of asymmetric management? If similar phenomena did exist outside of Asia, were they already fully discussed in some realm of international relations theory that I had not yet discovered? Approaching these questions required a great deal of exploration, and this book is the tentative answer.

The basic answers are yes and no. Yes, bilateral asymmetric patterns could be observed and a general theory could be worked out, and no, asymmetry was not a focal point for international relations theory. There was some literature on the diplomacy of small powers and on regional cultures of international relations, but not a focus on the management of asymmetric relationships. Asymmetry was crowded out by the great games of great powers. Its less avoidable appearances, such as the frustration of great powers in their small wars, were treated as merely peripheral anomalies. The exception that proved the rule was Andrew Mack's classic reflection on why the United States lost its small war with Vietnam: very insightful, but limited to a pathology of asymmetry.[7] There was room to grow the theory. But it had to grow beyond bilateral relations to include multilateral, regional, and global asymmetry. The Sino-Vietnamese experience was a perfect archetype for asymmetry, but it was too perfect – too bilateral, too acculturated, and ultimately too small. The ideas could be developed but not simply transplanted. In this book, I had to make a philosophical analysis of asymmetry starting from elemental bilateral interactions and proceeding to global patterns.

[6] Brantly Womack, *China among Unequals: Asymmetric Foreign Relations in Asia* (Singapore: World Scientific Press, 2010).

[7] Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars," *World Politics* 37:2 (January 1975), pp. 175–200.

BACK TO CHINA?

In the meantime, history had moved on. In 2008, the world's confidence in the strength of American unilateral hegemony was shaken while China seemed to move inexorably from peaceful rise to peaceful leap forward. Are we facing the prospect of a new hegemonic struggle *à la Ouest*, or the emergence of an orderly "all under heaven" *à la Est*? Or neither? With the opportunity to teach a seminar at University of Virginia on "China in your lifetime" to twenty-year-olds, I tried to grasp the basic trends of globalization, structures of political power, and demographics that were likely to continue and to shape the landscape not only of U.S.-China relations but also of the world order more generally. My conclusions, presented in Chapter 6, are that while rivalry between the United States and China is likely to persist, there is little likelihood of the formation of exclusive camps of alliances as in the Cold War. China's success in recruiting American allies into its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank despite American opposition resulted not from the expansion of China's camp but from the greater range of choices open to states in a globalized world. Rather than bipolarity, a multinodal framework is more likely in which the United States and China are the primary nodes but there are middle power and regional nodes as well.[8]

Capabilities count, and asymmetry continues to shape perceptions. But the increasing enmeshment in a global matrix will make attempts at domination more unwise, and unwise attempts will become more self-limiting in their outcomes. In the background, the convergence in life chances between the developed and developing worlds is leading to a redistribution of economic mass, of which China is only the most prominent example. The distance between the West and the rest is narrowing, though the power of numbers is quite different from the power of technology and capital. Even as China reaches parity with the United States in aggregate economic size, it will remain far behind in per-capita terms. Demographic power will confront technological power, but in a global context that they can neither control nor divide between them.

If a multinodal world remains asymmetric, then the question of how to manage asymmetric international relationships becomes paramount. The problem is that contact does not breed mutual understanding. Smaller countries are likely to have an exaggerated sense of their vulnerability, while larger states will be frustrated by their lack of control. International politics is likely to become noisier. With this in mind, this book introduces a new paradigm for understanding international relationships, one that focuses on and makes sense of the asymmetric jostlings that increasingly shape world politics, and proposes measures to preserve stability in such a world.

[8] Brantly Womack, "China's Future in a Multi-Nodal World Order," *Pacific Affairs* 87:2 (June 2014), pp. 265–84.

Acknowledgments

As the narrative in this preface suggests, this project has been so long in gestation and exploratory in its pursuits that a full accounting of its intellectual debts is impossible. I will therefore restrict my acknowledgments to direct contributors who helped guide this book, and even so, the list will remain incomplete.

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My apologies to colleagues in international relations who might justly feel that my attention to their relevant works is inadequate. In part, my excuse is that the book touches so many areas of concern that the general message could be at risk of becoming lost in the footnotes. Another problem is that, as the preface indicates, I came to the basic ideas from outside the field of international relations theory. Although I do not think I reinvented the wheel, I did roll in from another field and may have inadvertently crossed existing paths.

It is a pleasure to publish another book at Cambridge University Press with the help of Lew Bateman. I owe a special debt to the external readers. Their comments were exceptionally thorough and insightful and their judgments generous. Copy editor Kevin Eagan's generosity with commas has added breathing spaces to an otherwise too-tight text, and the efficiency of Mark Fox and Anand Shanmugam in the publication process is much appreciated.

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