

## THE BIPOLARIZATION IN EAST ASIA

*Professor Yan Xuetong\**

### EDITOR'S NOTE

*This is the speech delivered by Professor Yan Xuetong during Asian Security Conference, 2014 on "Emerging Strategic Trends in Asia and India's Response" organized by the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi on 19<sup>th</sup> February, 2014. Upon our request, he has forwarded the paper for publication in the Journal of Indian Research. Professor Yan has been ardent supporter of reevaluation of major power relationship. For him, the main question of contemporary international relation is whether the competition between China and the US will result in a disaster as often happened in history when two great powers collide; the second issue is whether it's possible for China to become a new superpower peacefully; and the third issue is whether China will behave like the historical hegemon, a tyrant or will it be a new kind of humane authority based upon winning hearts and minds of people. He has proposed the idea of Superficial Friendship rather than Superficial Enmity as the major power relationship paradigm characterizing relationship between China and the U.S., which consists of a healthy or peaceful strategic competition. In the future, major powers will need to deal with more conflicts between them, rather than less. To manage the situation from worsening, Professor Yan suggests a Football game model in managing conflict rather than Boxing match analogy for international relations, in which competitors clash within a set of rules without causing much harm. Unlike Boxing match, in Football game; violence is not the primary means of interaction. He compares the Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union to a Boxing match, and the current relationship between China and the United States to a game of Football. In this paper, Professor Yan hopes that China and India will develop cooperative relations rather than this new model of major power relations because the nature of the former is cooperation and the nature of the latter is competition.*

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"Multipolarization" has been a buzzword since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. However, the advocates for multipolarization have not currently identified any power possessing a nationally comprehensive strength which is similar to that of the United States. The financial crisis of 2008 dimmed the prominence of the U.S. as the only superpower but it still did not bring about any bright future for multipolarization. Since China's GDP surpassed Japan's in 2010, the term "bipolarization" has been an alternative forecast in contrast to the prediction of multipolarization. My latest book *The Inertia of History: China and the World in the Next Ten Years* presented a structural analysis of the possible trend of bipolarization. It will be very possible for all major powers to adopt foreign policy according to that trend in a visible future.

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Based on Deng Xiaoping's doctrine of "Keep a low profile, do something" (*tao guang yang hui, you suo zuo wei*), the Chinese government has advocated multipolarization for more than two decades. It is obvious that multipolarization would provide better conditions for China's interest in preventing American containment efforts directed against it. Nevertheless, the trend of bipolarization drove the U.S. to adopt a pivot/rebalancing strategy in East Asia in 2010. Some Chinese thought that the rebalancing strategy was merely a political technique used by the Obama administration for his election campaign, and hoped that the U.S. would still focus its strategy predominantly in the Middle East. Unfortunately, they were disappointed by Obama who clearly reiterated that the rebalancing strategy will not change under his administration. Faced with Obama's rebalancing strategy, China's new government, headed by Xi Jinping, changed China's foreign policy from the doctrine of "keeping a low profile" to the principle of "striving for achievement" (*Fen Fa You Wei*).

With regard to bilateral relations, Xi Jinping suggested developing a new model of major power relations with the United States. After hard diplomacy, the U.S. officially accepted this idea last November (2013) when Susan Rice delivered a speech at Georgetown University. This new model of major power relations between China and the U.S. is not characterized by a close relationship, but rather it consists of a healthy or peaceful strategic competition. The positive aspect of this agreement to establish a new model of major power relations is that it supports these two countries in working together while avoiding a repeat of the American-Soviet confrontation that occurred during the Cold War. The negative part of it is that in the future they will undoubtedly need to deal with more conflicts between them, rather than less. Personally, I hope that China and India will develop cooperative relations rather than this new model of major power relations because the nature of the former is cooperation and the nature of the latter is competition.

Most of the major powers including India have now adopted a policy to improve relations with China while managing their relations with the United States. In 2013, China further consolidated its relations with Russia, Germany, France and India while improving its relations with the United Kingdom. This phenomenon demonstrated that it is possible for most of the major powers to have good relations with both the China and the U.S. at the same time. Nevertheless, Japan could be an exception. The Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe adopted a confrontational policy with respect to the rise of China. He has regarded China's rise as an opportunity for Japan to get rid of Article 9 of Japan's Constitution and thereby transform itself into a military power. For the sake of achieving that goal, he purposely designed an official visit to the Yasukuni Shrine which honors 14 A-class war criminals of World War II, and has also adopted a confrontational policy on the territory disputes over Diaoyu Island. Additionally, the Abe regime tried to justify the Japanese policy of "comfort women" during the World War II and also its colonization of Korea before World War I. It is increasingly obvious that Abe has no intention of improving relations with China and South Korea. It is very possible that during his governance of Japan, China-Japan relations not only will become much worse than those between China and the U.S., but also could well become the worst of all bilateral relations between major powers.

Because Abe is determined to intensify the confrontation with China, we cannot rule out the possibility that he would order Japanese troops to shoot first, in the event of an armed stand-off. As long as Abe is in power, Japan's rightist policy will be as dangerous as North Korea's nuclear policy. These two problems have already become the two most important threats to regional stability in East Asia, which has enjoyed peace since 1991 when the Cambodian war ended. China adopted the principle of peaceful development but that principle does not mean China will tolerate Japanese-initiated military attacks. According to various historical studies, the weak initiate military attacks against the strong no less often than the strong do against the weak. Historical examples include the Japanese Navy's surprise military strike launched against the United States' naval base at Pearl Harbor in 1941 and al-Qaeda's attack on the U.S. in 2001. When Abe's government works hard at organizing an ideology alliance aimed at containment of China, it is not a good sign for world peace.

The process of bipolarization does not only have impact on major power relations, but also on regionalization in Asia. Asian countries have experienced both of the recent major financial crises—during 1997-1998 and then from 2008- onwards. Bipolarization will intensify the competition between the American Trans Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership (TPP) and Chinese regional cooperation, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The Chinese government has announced three plans for economic regionalization in Central Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia. These plans involve the belt of the silk route in Central Asia, the economic corridor composing China, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar, and the maritime silk route in Southeast Asia. Unfortunately, Abe's confrontation policy makes it impossible to develop sub-regional economic cooperation in the Northeast Asia.

Nevertheless, the China-U.S. competition for regional cooperation will benefit many countries economically in Asia. China will provide more capital to surrounding countries for regional cooperation and the U.S. will provide more favorable policy for Asian countries to access to American market.

Due to the strategic competition between China and the U.S. and China-Japan political confrontation, it is very possible for East Asia to become the world center within ten years. To be the coming world center, Asia has to be the region where global competitors reside as well as be the most valuable place for them to compete. By 2023, the GDP of East Asia will be larger than that of the whole of Europe or North America. Meanwhile East Asia may also have more tensions than the latter two regions. I am not a fatalist and I think we still have a chance to make Asia better than I have forecasted. My optimistic attitude is based on possible policy changes by Japan after Abe. Based on the rate of changing Japanese prime ministers after the Cold War, Abe will not stay in power for more than five years. After him, the world will have a chance to see a different Japanese government—one that will admit Japanese crimes during World War II and will prefer cooperation rather than confrontation. In that case, we will at least defuse one of the two major danger problems of Asian politics and of the world; those being Abe's government and the nuclear issue in the Korean Peninsula.