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DOMESTIC POLITICAL CHANGE AND GRAND STRATEGY

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Overview

Domestic Politics and Grand Strategy in Asia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter looks at domestic political developments in Asia and their implications for international relations and grand strategy in the region.

MAIN ARGUMENT:

Nearly all the major countries of Asia are undergoing important domestic political transitions that are affecting their governments. At the same time globalization, modernization, and a changing global balance of power are transforming the international environment. Understanding how internal developments shape regime responses to this shifting external environment is essential to properly assess changing strategies in the region. Responding effectively to any of these developments will necessitate responding to the underlying domestic political factors that are driving state behavior.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

- Economic change is driving the behavior of many critical Asian states, such as China, India, and Russia. Where maintaining economic success is a primary objective, grand strategies can in some ways be best understood as components of broader economic policies.
- Internal political transformations are drivers of international behavior in some other Asian states, such as Japan, South Korea, and Indonesia. Where democratization has deepened, political leaders more responsive to popular opinion have emerged to chart more assertive security approaches.
- The challenges of building institutions or arresting their decay dominate the agendas of still other Asian states, such as those in South and Central Asia. The informal social groups and militaries that control a growing share of political power in these countries define their grand strategies primarily in terms of maintaining regime survival and stability.
- Changing domestic political factors are also relevant in the pursuit by Iran of nuclear weapons, the growing plausibility of an Asian regional security architecture, and the increasing challenges posed to Asian countries by regional environmental problems.

Domestic Politics and Grand Strategy in Asia

Ashley J. Tellis

Domestic politics has long been viewed as a critical driver of a nation's grand strategy. From Thucydides in the west to Kautilya in the east, the character of a state's domestic politics—understood as encompassing everything from its history, ideology, economic arrangements, and governing institutions—was perceived to be the principal determinant of its national goals. To the degree that these goals could be realized only in reference to the objectives of other states—which, in turn, were conditioned by their own history, ideology, economic arrangements, and governing institutions—domestic politics was seen to shape the character of the international system as well. This articulation was masterfully sketched out in Thucydides' great work, *The Peloponnesian War*. Because of its assertion that “the real cause” of the conflict between Athens and Sparta was “the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon,” this opus is often viewed as the acme of “systemic” realism. Yet, often overlooked is that Thucydides, despite having provided the most celebrated “structural” explanation for this collision, discerned its causes in the core conditions of domestic politics, in particular, the spiritedness of Athens and the passivity of Sparta. These internal characteristics defined the “grand strategies” of the two states and, together, created conditions for the combative struggle that Thucydides would describe “as a war like no other.”¹

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¹ For an analysis of Thucydides' explanation of the Peloponnesian War from the perspective of social science, see Ashley J. Tellis, “Reconstructing Political Realism: The Long March to Scientific Theory,” in “Roots of Realism,” ed. Benjamin Frankel, special issue, *Security Studies* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 3–100.

This approach to understanding international relations and grand strategy as outcomes of domestic politics has been part of a long tradition of political inquiry that, until the advent of neo-realism, was the dominant mode of explaining the actions of states. After Thucydides, a long and distinguished list of Western political theorists—such as Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Kant, and Burke—and Eastern theorists such as Kautilya all in different ways argued that domestic and international political life cannot be understood except through the prism of the “regime.” The regime writ large—meaning the values and structures associated with the distribution of power within a country—provided the medium for human nature to express itself.² This human expression invariably found a distinctive manifestation in the country’s “grand strategy,” which could be understood as the device by which statesmen organize the whole gamut of domestic and international resources to produce, at the very least, security for their country. Such a grand strategy would, no doubt, be shaped by the perceptions of the power, interests, and objectives of one’s neighbors; these realities would, however, also be comprehensible only as products of their own domestic politics or, in other words, the strategic choices of those regimes.

This introductory chapter is divided into three sections. The first section argues for incorporating “domestic” politics into theories of international politics, especially realist theories of international politics. Such incorporation is beneficial for explanatory comprehensiveness and on the grounds of fidelity to the larger tradition, which has always been concerned over how power has been exercised both within and outside states. The second section surveys the key currents of contemporary domestic politics in Asia as analyzed by the various authors whose work is included in this volume. The third and concluding section highlights the key issues for policymakers that are suggested by the various country, regional, and topical studies found in this book.

Restoring Domestic Factors and Grand Strategy to International Politics

This volume, *Strategic Asia 2007–08: Domestic Political Change and Grand Strategy*, explores how domestic politics and the changes occurring therein in key Asian states affect their grand strategies. Although every

² Eugene F. Miller, “Leo Strauss: Philosophy and American Social Science,” in *Leo Strauss, the Straussians and the American Regime*, ed. Kenneth L. Deutsch and John A. Murley (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 91–102; and Steven Lenzner and William Kristol, “What was Leo Strauss up to?” *The Public Interest* 153 (Fall 2003): 9–39.

volume of the Strategic Asia series since its inception has implicitly engaged issues of domestic politics in the context of exploring the annual main theme, this year's effort makes domestic politics the explicit center of analytical attention. The goal of the research, as always, is to explain a nation's "grand strategy," meaning the objects and instruments by which a given country produces national security, and to understand the international consequences of these strategies and other driving forces for the country itself, the larger region, and the United States. The volume therefore focuses on grand strategy as the dependent variable. The goal is twofold: first to describe the national security goals of various Asian states, and second, and more importantly, to explain how these states have gone about securing their interests in the context of the larger changes in their domestic environment.

This focus on domestic politics and the changes occurring in the key Asian states is of particular interest because almost all the major countries of Asia are undergoing significant internal political transitions, either in terms of leadership change, ideological flux, institutional alteration, or societal transformation. In political history such dramatic transitions rarely occur synchronically within a given region, especially one that is as diverse and important as Asia. By all accounts, the Asian continent is clearly becoming the most important concentration of power within the international system; how this power will be employed in the years and decades ahead remains an issue of considerable significance. Because this exercise of power will arguably depend greatly on the nature of the regimes found in various Asian states, an examination of the transformations taking place in their domestic politics and how these changes are affecting or could affect their respective grand strategies is worthwhile.

Such an effort has particular merit because a wide range of contemporary scholarship in political science and international relations theory has demonstrated that domestic politics plays an extraordinary role in how states respond even to those challenges which ordinarily appear to lie outside the bounds of domestic politics as conventionally understood. Thus, for example, Jack Snyder has shown how domestic struggles within states shape their international ambitions. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and David Lalman have demonstrated how domestic politics affects choices involving interstate war, while Susan Peterson has shown the same with respect to crisis bargaining. Bruce Russett has cogently argued the case for why certain domestic political structures and regimes, such as democracy, have significant pacifying effects even in an otherwise anarchic international political system. Daniel Verdier, Sharyn O'Halloran, and Helen Milner have made seminal contributions on how domestic politics