The Clash of Global and Regional Norms and Their Implications to East Asia

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I. Introduction

Francis Fukuyama, in his 1989 writing, once said that since the end of the Cold War, the world has seen the triumph of liberalism.1) The end of the Cold War means a liberal order led by only one superpower, the United States. It also represents the spread of liberal ideas of free market and democracy both to already democratic and non-democratic states. However, this also implies the potential clash between these liberal ideas and that of non-democratic nations. In particular, the end of the Cold War becomes more and more controversial with the continuous rapid rise of one state—China—and what it implies for the current liberal order.

The rise of China is especially contentious to international politics. It is one of the few remaining non-democratic regimes that contradict with the current liberal order. Typical realist scholars argue that China's rise will be dangerous to the stability of the world order, as any rising state poses a potential challenge to contemporary international relations. From a liberal perspective, China’s continuous engagement and integration into the world economy will promote more cooperation and stability. However, for democratic peace theorists, China's non-democratic regime is particularly dangerous as non-democracies are more likely to be involved in conflict. This paper argues that from a normative perspective, China's ascendance should be seen within the historical context of the East Asian region. Due to China's size,2) it was possible to create a regional order in East Asia that had less conflict for almost 500 years up until the 19th century. And this historical regional order has implications to the contemporary East Asian regional order.

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especially with the re rising of China. In order to illustrate my argument, the next section will discuss norms from a western and East Asian perspective. Based on this discussion, it will find implications to contemporary international relations, particularly during the periods of George Bush II and Hu Jintao governments. Bush II (2000 - 2008) and Hu’s (2002 - 2012) leadership relatively started at the same period and both had or in the case of the latter, will finish two terms in office. Since the post Cold War, the US stood to be the only hegemonic power to lead the current order. The US has since then in a unilateral tried to expand liberal ideas of democracy to other non democratic states particularly during the Bush II period. China, since its opening up and the collapse of the Cold War, has economically continued to develop, and many western scholars argue the “China threat” due to its authoritarian government. On the one hand, the US during the Bush II administration has rekindled old and new enemies under the guidance of exporting democracy. On the other hand, China under Hu Jintao’s leadership seemingly has seen less conflict and instead tried to foster more cooperation within the region. It is quite paradoxical the different outcomes that the two leaderships have brought about. Thus, it is time to review the significance of norms to better understand the two different political consequences.

II. How Norms Matter

The simplest definition of norms is that it is a “rule of behavior.”\(^3\) Whether we talk about relations among social groups or state to state relations, this definition can apply. In international norms, according to Axelrod, he defined norms as in any “given social setting, norm exists to the extent that individuals usually act in a certain way and are often punished when seen not to be acting in this way.”\(^4\) Florini elaborated the definition of norms to include “how states determine their interests, and the role of social construction in shaping behavior… the sense of “oughtness” that is analytically distinct… that sense of obligation that we need a term”\(^5\): thus, Florini defined norms as

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