

# What is the Point of the Ikenberry-Acharya Debate?

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## Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Great Recession triggered by the Lehman shock in 2008, writings on American decline have proliferated. World-renowned scholars and commentators have all pointed out that the American hegemony or empire is rapidly coming to an end, and that as a consequence the world is in greater turmoil than ever (for example, Zakaria, 2008; Friedman and Mandelbaum, 2011; Kupchan, 2012; Bremmer, 2012). Although there are differences among various works, most commentators predict a bleak prospect for the future.

Amidst all this pessimistic post-Lehman-world literature, Ikenberry's (2011) book stands out in terms of its optimism regarding the resilience of the American-led world order. Despite the reputation of American leadership in the world having been tarnished by President George W. Bush's unabashed unilateralism in his pursuit of the 'War on Terror', Ikenberry thinks that the American-centered world order is still here to stay for the foreseeable future. In particular, he firmly believes in the American-led world order's ability to co-opt new emerging powers such as China and India into its fold.

Recently, Acharya (2014) critiqued Ikenberry's work in his short book entitled *The End of the American World Order*. Not only does he point out the weaknesses in Ikenberry's thesis, but he also presents a picture of the future that is radically different from the present-day American world order (AWO).

## Back to the Future?

The current debate is highly reminiscent of the older debate about the hegemonic stability theory (HST), although the protagonists in the current debate seem to forget that. Where did the older debate on HST leave off? Kindleberger (1973), Krasner (1976) and many more argued that hegemony is a necessary condition for the smooth functioning of the world economy because the hegemon plays some essential roles, such as the lender of last resort and the lead role in international adjustments, as if it were

a conductor of the international orchestra. In addition, the hegemon coerces, bribes, cajoles, and persuades other countries to liberalize their trade rules. In this way, a free, open, and stable international economy is capable of sustaining itself. Thus, the decline of hegemony in its ability to provide these 'public goods' functions means trouble to the stability of the world economy. However, critics of the HST found many holes in its logic and in the evidence for the theory. Among others, Keohane (1984) argued that international regimes and institutions that were created under American hegemony have a life of their own. In particular, they facilitate cooperation among the major economies and in turn this cooperation will help sustain these postwar institutions. This theory can account for the persistence of the Bretton Woods institutions and the upgrading of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) into the World Trade Organization (WTO) despite the steady decline of American hegemony.

While the debate on HST described above was relatively silent about the role of hegemony in the area of security, there was a version of the HST that included both military and economic aspects of hegemony: Gilpin's (1981) theory analyzed the hegemonic cycle in world politics. According to his theory, hegemonic decline is accompanied by a hegemonic war that then leads to another round of hegemony by a different victor state. Compared to the original HST described in the previous paragraph, Gilpin's theory did not receive much attention in part because hegemonic war no doubt has been considered a thing of the past in today's nuclear age. The Cold War soon ended and the 'unipolar' period was ushered in; therefore, this version of the theory was forgotten very quickly.

In a sense, Ikenberry's theory can be considered an elaboration on and an amendment to Keohane's thesis about post-hegemonic stability. While he sees quite a difference between hegemonic stability (HS) under bipolarity during the Cold War and HS under American unipolarity after the end of the Cold War, he foresees stability and perhaps the continuation of order even after the decline of American hegemony.

However, Ikenberry adds a few new elements to Keohane's optimism about the durability of the liberal international order. First, because of nuclear deterrence great-power war, the old mechanism of hegemonic turnover, is no longer likely (Ikenberry, 2011: 338). Second, he argues that the postwar liberal order is inherently 'easy to join and hard to overturn' (ibid.: 340). Third, the rising powers of today do not form a united front against the existing order (ibid.: 341). Finally, all the great powers today are status quo powers (ibid.: 341). Ikenberry correctly points out that the future of the liberal order 'hinges on China' (ibid.: 343). Nevertheless, he is absolutely sure that 'its (China's) ability to build a new international order from the ground up is essentially impossible (sic)' (ibid.: 346).

If Ikenberry's argument is reminiscent of Keohane's, Acharya's theory can be interpreted as a modification of Krasner's theory of hegemonic openness. While Krasner's prediction that world trade will become more closed after the decline of American hegemony is belied by facts on the ground, his prediction that the post-hegemonic world is characterized by increasing regionalism is valid and Acharya's argument is consistent with that.

In sum, the debate between Ikenberry and Acharya is highly reminiscent of the earlier debate on HST and hence the question is what is new in the debate. In my opinion, the most important new element is that they consider 'order' as singular instead of plural. The earlier debates were based on regime theory in which regimes (in the plural) are sets of norms and rules in given areas such as trade and money. Therefore, the degree to which different regimes are subject to stability and instability due to hegemonic decline was supposed to be different. Now such a compartmentalized worldview is discarded, and all issues – including security, economics, and others – are contained in this new view of an international 'order.' Therefore, the proposed theory is all encompassing and accordingly the debate is much broader in scope.

### **Acharya's arguments in brief**

The role of regional order is a point of departure for Acharya. He argues that Ikenberry's theory of an international order ignores the role of regional order. Acharya's earlier work focused on how different regions 'localized' and assimilated global norms taking their own characteristics into account (Acharya, 2004, 2009). To the extent that this point concerns the future, it cannot be subjected to empirical investigations yet, but the role of regional order in the recent past can be empirically analyzed and if properly done, this may contribute to the knowledge and theory. Indeed, a number of books comparing regional security organizations have been written in recent years (Acharya and Johnston, 2007; Breslin and Croft, 2012).

In addition, Acharya attributes a much greater role to emerging powers in the creation of order in world politics than Ikenberry. To buttress his point, he suggests several examples where emerging powers gave birth to or strongly promoted certain 'ordering' ideas that are somewhat alien to the American conceptions of world order (Acharya, 2014: 42–3, 76–7). However, his list of non-Western intellectual contributions to the world order is not meant to be exhaustive. There must be other examples of norms, principles, and other 'ordering' ideas that were created or promoted by emerging powers independently from the influence of American hegemony.

In contrast to Ikenberry, Acharya considers a different set of scenarios for the future. Although he entertains the possibility of a great power concert, the more likely scenario for him is a new type of regionalism that in his view is already on the rise. He states, 'new forms of regionalism have emerged around the world, some formal and institutionalized, like the EU, others more informal and non-legalistic, like ASEAN' (Acharya, 2014: 111). Acharya is careful not to prejudge the stability of such regional orders, but he is more willing to bet on cooperation (i.e., stability): 'These different (regional) worlds will have powerful incentives to collude, not just collide' (p. 115).

### **East Asia in crisis**

Thus, Ikenberry sees the resilience of the American-led world order while Acharya sees hope for the regional order. Looking at this debate from East Asia, I feel uneasy because both of them seem to be oblivious to the crises in the world order that are unfolding openly today. The most obvious examples are Russia's new adventurism and

the turmoil in the Middle East, but instead of focusing on the obvious, I will concentrate on the less apparent but equally important erosion of the American-led regional order in East Asia.

There is no doubt that the regional order in East Asia is in crisis. If the Bush administration's vice was excessive unilateralism and an imperialist instinct, the Obama administration that inherited the economic crisis from the Bush administration was excessively inward looking. While US attention was diverted to domestic problems, the international order in East Asia quickly deteriorated.

Between Japan and China, rivalry over the Senkaku Islands and other issues have reached a boiling point. After Japan nationalized the islands in September 2012, China's challenge to Japanese sovereignty over the Senkakus has become ostentatious. Chinese ships started to enter the territorial waters, brazenly disregarding Japanese warnings. In November 2013, the Chinese government set up an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) above the islands. In January 2014, a destroyer and a helicopter of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force were targeted by a Chinese navy vessel's fire-control radar, which was a signal that Chinese forces were ready to shoot them in an instant.

While Chinese challenges to Japan quietened down after President Obama declared that the US-Japan Security Treaty covered the Senkaku Islands in April 2014, China's behavior became even more brazen in the South China Sea. In May 2014, the country started oil-digging operations in waters claimed by both China and Vietnam. In addition, a Chinese ship collided with a Vietnamese fishing ship and the latter sank. On 10 July 2014, the US Senate adopted a resolution denouncing Chinese expansionism in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. In an apparent move to calm the situation, the Chinese oil company announced a week later that their oil-digging operation was over.

All these incidents are worrisome and they could easily lead to full-blown military clashes if they were not handled properly. Therefore, agreement on codes of conduct in both the East China Sea and the South China Sea is desperately needed, but China refuses to endorse such codes.

None of these dramas in East Asia figure prominently in either Ikenberry's or Acharya's book. Ikenberry could be excused because his book was written in a period when the memory of China's 'charm offensive' in the 2000s still lingered. Acharya's book was written when the crisis in East Asia was unfolding, and I do not see how he can be so sanguine about regional order.<sup>1</sup>

### Conclusions

Acharya's recent book has pointed out important weaknesses and gaps in Ikenberry's treatise on the American-led world order. I think that his hidden theme

<sup>1</sup> Acharya is very careful not to make a judgment about the true nature of China's regional strategy. All he says is that 'evidence to support either view (a sphere of influence or benign hegemony) is scarce' (Acharya, 2014: 105).

in doing so was a call for more non-American and non-European contributions to international relations (IR). Thus far, the discipline of IR has been dominated by American and European scholars. But in this globalized world, such a disparity is anything but healthy. The crisis in East Asia points toward a need for Asian scholars to contribute more to IR theory so that the theory in turn can be utilized to improve the regional order as well as the world order.

### About the author

**Keisuke Iida** is Professor in the Graduate School for Law and Politics at the University of Tokyo. He holds a Ph.D. from Harvard University and has formerly taught at Princeton University and Aoyama Gakuin University. His major publications include *Legalization and Japan: The Politics of WTO Dispute Settlement* (2006) and *International Monetary Cooperation among the United States, Japan, and Germany* (1999). He has also published in major journals such as *Global Governance*, *International Organization*, *International Studies Quarterly*, and *Public Choice*. His current research interests include the politics of regional integration in East Asia, the politics of trade, including energy trade, and the political economy of financial and currency crises.

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