East Asia has witnessed tremendous changes since the onset of the 21st century, especially in recent years. Some new features and trends have loomed large. The first is the rise of China. After years of rapid development, China has become the second-largest economy in the world and its overall capabilities have remarkably strengthened. The rise of China has directly resulted in the tilting balance of power in East Asia.

The second is the continuing regional economic integration. Since the beginning of the 21st century, East Asian countries have significantly promoted cooperation in economic, financial and non-traditional security and other areas, deepening their economic integration, establishing closer interaction and strengthening their “regional consciousness”. East Asia is being transformed from merely a geographical concept to a unified economic, social and political identity, which will lay a sound foundation for the establishment of the “East Asian Community” – a long-term goal in the region.

The United States has responded to the changes taking place in East Asia by implementing a “rebalancing” strategy to the region. It is increasing its policy and resource inputs into the Asia-Pacific to maintain and expand its strategic and economic interests in Asia and

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counterbalance China’s ever-growing power and influence.

The author explores the causes of the development of the normative order in East Asia after the conclusion of the Cold War, and tries to investigate the essence of the Sino-US rivalry in East Asia and its implications for the evolution of the East Asian order. In the end, the author stresses the importance of benign competition between China and the United States in the region and provides some proposals for the two powers to exist harmoniously in East Asia and work together for the peace and development of East Asia.

I. The Development of the East Asian Normative Order and Its Causes

Generally speaking, the international order can be divided into two types – the power order and the normative order. The power order of the international system refers to the power relations among different countries within the system, which is mainly the order decided by the power contrasts among countries. The normative order refers to the order decided by the different norm-building capabilities of countries within the international system. The East Asian order in the post-Cold War era is a mix of the two orders. However, it is an undeniable fact that norms and institutions have played an increasingly important role in East Asia while the role of power has increasingly been put under constraints. As a result, the normative order has become more evident in East Asia while the power order has generally been weakened. That is not only a result of regional geopolitics, geo-economy and strategies adopted by main countries in the region, but also raises an objective demand for coping with emerging problems and challenges in East Asia.

(I) New reality of geopolitics and geo-economy

First, both China and the US are nuclear powers that possess effective means to launch devastating attacks on one another. But if subject to a
nuclear attack, countries with vast territory would be able to strike back and take revenge. Consequently, a “peace under terror” has been formed, in which big powers exercise mutual constraint and none dares to recklessly launch a war against another power.

Second, in an era of economic globalization, major countries in the world have intertwined interests, and their mutual dependence has become increasingly deepened, forming such a complicated relationship as “a country’s loss or benefit means loss or benefit to all”. The zero-sum game, which features simple interests competition, has gradually become something of the past. Contradictions and confrontation will not disappear, but both sides will surely confine them to a certain range to avoid head-on clashes.

Third, many international systems set up by the US after the end of World War II are mainly implemented in the Western world. After the end of the Cold War, some East Asian countries successively embraced the US-led liberalist international order. Especially after undergoing an integration process for 20 years, East Asian countries have already formed relatively intimate economic cooperation and established an ASEAN-centered regional cooperation system. The ASEAN member states have established a set of “ASEAN norms” that have proven effective in guiding regional cooperation in East Asia. All these factors have helped create an environment favorable for norm building in East Asia.

(II) New problems and challenges

Global tensions eased a lot after the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. However, problems that used to be ignored and covered up have emerged again, posing new challenges and bringing new phenomena to the international system.

First, global issues, including civil wars, terrorism, economic crisis,
financial chaos, natural disasters, climate change and epidemics, have continuously sprung up. In an effort to resolve them, the international society has raised one plan after another but failed to achieve obvious effects. Cross-border threats and global problems have been left unresolved, with some even becoming more serious. However, despite these new situations, the international system and systematic arrangements have lagged far behind, and no groundbreaking progresses have been achieved in creating those ideologies bolstering these rules and arrangements. Any single country alone cannot resolve global problems and their settlement needs the joint efforts from all countries. However, the current international governance mechanism remains seriously insufficient.

Second, some developing countries have risen rapidly and various supranational and non-national forces have emerged after the end of the Cold War, each having its own development request. By contrast, the existing international governance system is obviously insufficient in considering and meeting the rightful demands from these emerging forces.

Third, some strategic frontiers have successively been formed, such as cyberspace, the North and South poles and the space. Nevertheless, the international society has not formulated rules on them. Rules urgently need to be laid down to address this lack.

(III) Strategic preferences of East Asian powers

The development tendency of the international order has much to do with the preference of regional powers. In January 2012, the Obama government released a report entitled “Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense”, which pointed out that “working closely with our network of allies and partners, we will continue to

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promote a rules-based international order that ensures underlying stability and encourages the peaceful rise of new powers, economic dynamism, and constructive defense cooperation.” The rules mentioned by the Obama government include free and open commerce, peaceful solution of disputes, universal access to global public domains such as the sky, space and the ocean, as well as openness, liberty, transparency and equity in the economic order. The US hopes that, through the efforts of itself and its allies, these rules can be fully demonstrated in the new regional economic and security order. In her 2011 essay “America’s Pacific Century”, the former US secretary of state Hillary Clinton said that, “We are asking these emerging partners to join us in shaping and participating in a rules-based regional and global order.”3 Considering the rapid rise of China, the US has also raised the “China’s responsibilities” theory in the hope of restraining the rising China through norms to meet the US interests.4 Hillary Clinton’s speech on “US-China Relations in the 21st Century”, delivered in January 2011, typically illustrates such a theory. In the speech, she said clearly that China’s development should not be considered a threat, and insisted that, despite their different political systems and philosophies, “both have much more to gain from cooperation than from conflict”. “The future of our relationship can be strong if we each meet our responsibilities as great nations[…]We think that there are ways that China can be a unique leader in the 21st century”, she said, “but that means accepting a share of the burden of solving common problems, abiding by and helping to shape a rules-based international order”.5

The US values the role of norms, and holds the view that in a sharp

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4 “China’s responsibility” theory includes two aspects: first, with the growth of its comprehensive strength and the rise of its international status, China should take more international responsibilities and “duties” as a big power according to the “responsibilities matching national force” principle; second, the current international responsibilities and duties for China are far from sufficient and they must be further regulated by international rules and norms, so that China can better perform its duties and responsibilities according to Western norms. Such Western requirements raised for China clearly embody their aim of balancing China’s rise to defuse challenges with international norms.
contrast to the “suppressive” measures of hard power, management through norms has a higher cost-benefit ratio and more legitimacy, and is also better for helping the US maintain its hegemony. In the eyes of the Obama administration, under the background that fundamental changes have emerged in the power contrast in the Asia-Pacific region, being the master rules-builder is central to the US maintaining its dominance in the region, as well as the symbol of its soft and smart power.

The new generation of Chinese leaders emphasizes the role of international norms in diplomacy. By obeying and implementing the accepted and approved international rules, China has not only deepened its understanding and perception of the rules, but has also taken advantage of these rules to serve its national interests to the maximum in a reasonable and legitimate manner. In order to defend its just interests, China hopes to reform the international norms that fail to follow the trend to better reflect equity and justice.

Out of their varying interests, China and the US have divergences over norms in East Asia. Concerning security, China needs to defend its core and important interests in the region, including curbing the forces for “Taiwan independence”, defending its sovereignty and maritime rights in the South and East China seas, maintaining a secure and stable strategic environment and continuously boosting its national defense capabilities. While the US seeks to maintain and strengthen its military superiority in the region, maintain and expand its security ties in the region, contain the development of China’s strength and the spread of its influence, and stand opposite China in the disputes in the South China Sea and over the sovereignty of the Diaoyu Islands. In other words, what China expects is more security and greater ability to defend its interests in the region, while the US strives to keep the “security vulnerability” of China and restrict it to “limited measures” so that the US can sustain its predominance in security affairs. On the economic front, China hopes to push forward East Asian economic cooperation, form closer economic
links with regional countries, and continue to participate in Asia-Pacific economic cooperation, while the US endeavors to delay or halt East Asian cooperation, putting in place an alternative mechanism for Asia-Pacific cooperation exclusive of China. In terms of politics, China hopes to promote the formation of an equal, cooperative and harmonious order in the Asia-Pacific region, and play a bigger role in regional affairs, while the US is trying to maintain its primacy and halt China’s rise, and take China as a target on which it can exert pressure through democracy and human rights issues. Both China and the US seek to acquire an advantageous position in the East Asian normative order through actively creating norms.

That being said, China and the US share important common interests in East Asia, which have provided them with incentives for cooperation on the formulation of norms. In security, both countries hope to maintain regional peace and stability, and share interests in fighting terrorism, preventing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and ensuring freedom of navigation at sea. In the economic domain, both China and the US desire to bolster Asia-Pacific economic growth and promote liberalization of regional trade and investment as well as economic and technological cooperation. Politically, both support countries in the region to enhance relations with each other, establish mutual trust and strengthen cooperation, and also support the construction and the improvement of an open, tolerant, win-win regional cooperation framework. Sino-US cooperation in economic and security fields in the Asia-Pacific region, based on common or similar interests, remains both an important part of their benign interaction and a flash point for their bilateral relations.

Furthermore, as two great powers in East Asia, China and the US also bear the special responsibility of maintaining regional peace and stability, deciding the power and norm-building competition between them will surely be put within a limited range. The general peace and stability of East Asia are not only in the fundamental interests of East
Asian countries, but also conform to the fundamental interests of both China and the US. Peace and stability in East Asia cannot be maintained without Sino-US cooperation.

II. Norm-Building Is the Focus of Rivalries for East Asian Order

At present and for a long period in the predictable future, the rivalries among various forces in East Asia involving norms building will be the focus of the struggles for regional order. Each party will hope to gain an upper hand in the reconstructed regional order through advocating its own norms.

First, considering the comparative decline of its strength, the US hopes to take advantage of extant norms and create some new norms to maintain its leading position in East Asia. The US is also attempting to utilize the existing US-dominated international norms to restrain and limit China’s rise and serve its interests. The “China’s responsibilities” theory, advocated by the US and other Western countries, insists that China’s international responsibilities and duties are far from sufficient and that Beijing should shoulder more, which would further restrain it by international norms. These explicitly embody the US’ aim of balancing China’s rise and easing the challenges China’s rise is supposed to pose.

Second, China holds that the current international system is generally in its favor and that it can assuage neighboring nations’ misgivings over its rise and achieve peaceful rise through participating in multilateral mechanisms. Therefore China holds a positive attitude to them. Nevertheless, heading for a global power, it is never enough for China to simply follow existing norms, because in so doing, it can neither play its deserved role in constructing the regional order nor be understood by neighboring countries. As a responsible power and an emerging global power, China is playing an increasingly bigger role in the building of norms. China has already become an initiator of regional norms, instead of a passive receiver or follower of the rules and regulations formulated
by others.

Third, ASEAN is trying to safeguard its position as a “regional leader” in East Asian cooperation through norms building and their popularization. After the end of the Cold War, especially after the financial crisis that hit Asia in 1997 and 1998, ASEAN members have adopted an integration strategy. Since then, ASEAN has established dialogue partnerships with China, Japan and South Korea and developed “ASEAN norms” on the basis of a series of regional cooperation mechanisms. As the group of small- and medium-sized nations in East Asia, ASEAN faces several surrounding powers so it has used “ASEAN norms” to deal with China, the US and Japan, trying to regulate their behavior and also achieving tangible effects. In a sense, it is under the norms and cooperation mechanisms that ASEAN has sustained its leading position in East Asian cooperation and held a seat in the rebuilding of the regional structure.

III. Benign Competition Benefits Both Sides

The US is the only existing superpower but its strength is on a comparative decline, so it is particularly sensitive to the uplift of China’s strength and its expanding influence. Especially in East Asia, China’s rise and the ensuing power redistribution are very prominent. At the same time, China also feels the threat of the US’ alliance system to its security. The majority of international relations experts and strategists agree that the current China-US relations are a relationship of both competition and cooperation. However, such a relationship will not remain stable all the time. It will very likely become sour and even get stuck in a new “Cold War” resulting from misperceptions and misjudgments by either party or other countries.

The US’ “rebalancing” strategy to Asia has deepened mutual misgivings between China and the US in political, economic and military realms, and weakened their strategic mutual trust. That has put Sino-US
relations in a “drifting” state. The “ups and downs” in Sino-US relations are common, but the importance of bilateral ties means long-term “drifting” is not in the interests of either and could also easily lead to chaos in the regional even the world pattern. Therefore, both countries should continuously strive to ramp up and consolidate their cooperation, work together to build a new type of big-power relations, properly resolve their competition and divergences under the principles of “non-conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect, cooperation for win-win,” and try to avoid military and vicious competition. The following proposals are conducive to cultivating a sound Sino-US relationship.

(I) Assuaging US concerns

As the only superpower and facing a comparative decline of its strength, the US is especially sensitive to the rise of China’s strength and the expansion of its influence. That requires China assure the US that it has neither the intention of pursuing hegemony in East Asia like Japan did before World War II, nor the intention of seeking to establish a China-centered East Asian order. First, there has never been a “hegemonic gene” in China’s culture. What Chinese people have long cherished is the “king’s way”, one that emphasizes benevolence, but not the “tyrant’s way, one that emphasize the conquest through the use of force. The differences between the two ideologies are deep-rooted in traditional Chinese culture. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Chinese leaders repeatedly expressed the stance that China would not pursue being a hegemonic power and similar statements can also be found in its Constitution. Therefore, there is no validity to the suggestion of “China seeking hegemony”. Second, even if China were to replace the US one day as the world’s largest economy, there would still be huge gaps between them whether in their resources endowment, or in their strategic position and environment. From a historical perspective, it has always China’s weakness that has led to turbulence in Asia; a strong and stable China has always meant Asia was in an orderly state.
Therefore, a strong and stable China is good fortune, not misfortune to the US. China needs to guide Sino-US relations with the concept of new-model big-power relationship for a constructive cooperative posture from the United States.

(II) Co-building global governance norms

Different from other countries in East Asia, China is not only a regional power, but a global power. To deal with its competition with the US in East Asia (including competition over norms building), China can take advantage of its position as a global power to cultivate new growth points for bilateral relations on the building of global governance mechanisms and norms. At present, threats to global peace and prosperity mainly come from poverty, climate change, nuclear proliferation, biological insecurity, social unrest, regional conflicts, cross-border terrorism and economic crisis. In the coming 20 years, the international society will continuously seek reform, transformation and innovation of international systems, so as to change the lack of norms and raise the level of global governance. As the world’s largest developing and developed country respectively, China and the US doubtlessly share common demands and responsibilities in building international norms, which lays a solid foundation for bilateral cooperation in this aspect. Sino-US cooperation principles and mechanisms on climate change and clean energy will provide new norms for the international community regarding climate change.

(III) Candid communication

The healthy and stable development of Sino-US relations is particularly important to the two countries, but also to East Asia and the world as a whole. At the same time, Sino-US relations are quite complicated, with new challenges and problems emerging. That requires both countries communicate sincerely and make clear to each other their interests and concerns, so as to find new approaches and solutions to
problems. In recent years, China and the US have had candid and in-depth communications on the regional situation, their Asia-Pacific policies and regional hotspot issues through summit meetings, strategic and economic dialogues, strategic and security dialogues, as well as discussions on Asia-Pacific affairs. The two countries have also maintained close communication and coordination in some regional multilateral cooperation mechanisms, such as the APEC meetings, East Asian summit meetings and ASEAN regional forums, and held some helpful discussions on coexistence in Asia-Pacific, which have helped enhance mutual understanding, expand common consensus and promote cooperation.

(IV) Managing divergences

The current world we are living in is experiencing both globalization and multi-polarization. It is a diversified and colorful world. China and the US have different social systems and historical and cultural backgrounds. The core of democracy is to respect the choice of a country’s people themselves. Only when China and the US respect the systems and paths chosen by each other’s people, respect each other’s core interests and concerns, will they be able to cooperate on common points and avoid confrontation induced by their divergences, and realize peaceful coexistence in the long run. In the case of emerging divergences, they should abide by each convincing the other through reasoning, instead of excessively focusing on minor losses and gains. More importantly, they need to establish an effective error-correcting mechanism and a benign mutual-balancing and error-correcting mechanism. China and the US also need to make greater efforts for crisis control and management, try not to shirk their responsibilities or transfer a crisis to the other, and prevent a minor crisis and divergence from escalating into a bigger one and even a conflict.

From a realistic perspective, China and the US do not rely on natural emotions or blood bonds, but depend on good mechanisms, to maintain
bilateral relations. The two countries should make better use of and further develop such platforms as the China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue, China-US High-level Consultation on People-to-people Exchanges, China-US Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade, as well as new platforms such as the Strategic and Security Dialogue and Asia-Pacific Affairs Consultation.

IV. Conclusion

East Asia is evolving toward more of a normative order after the end of the Cold War even though power rivalry is severe at times. Under such circumstances, both China and the United States are engaged in heated competition for norms building in East Asia, so as to possess a favorable position in the East Asian order. Being the most important actors in East Asia, it is imperative that China and the US find ways to live harmoniously together in East Asia and work together for the peace and development of East Asia.