
25. Russia and a new balance of power in East Asia: implications for stability on the Korean Peninsula

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I. Introduction

Unlike Europe, East Asia has no institutionalized cooperative security system. In Europe, a well-defined cooperative security system consisting of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in European (OSCE) and the European Union (EU) is already in place, but in Asia there is no such system on the horizon. The cold war was over in Europe in 1989 but its legacy still lingers in East Asia.

A precarious and volatile system based on three separate bilateral security treaties has served to stabilize the peace in the region—the security treaty between China and North Korea (the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, DPRK) and the Japanese–US and South Korean–US treaties of mutual defence. This means that the basic security structure inherited from the cold war system remains largely unchanged. The basic problem stems from the discrepancy between the old security system and the changing political dynamics in East Asia.

During the cold war, a strategic balance between communist and non-communist states successfully deterred any large-scale military conflict between the major powers. In the post-cold war era, however, security ties based on ideological fraternity are weakening and as a result bilateral security treaties that were forged in the past are being transformed. Released from tight control by the leader state of the blocs, every nation is striving for its own national interest. The tight bipolar system has collapsed and a new alliance system is emerging based on newly defined common interests. Old security treaties are being readjusted and a new multilateral balance-of-power system is likely to replace the old bipolar alliance.¹

The USA is seeking to sustain a dominant position in East Asia so that it can fulfil the dream of *Pax Americana*—a worldwide community of free-market democracies. China, a re-emerging power in Asia, is gradually moving to restore the old China-centred world order, although this may take decades to

¹ Gerald Segal observes that ‘there are signs of a developing post-cold war balance of power in Asia’. He stresses in particular that in order to manage China, ‘constraintment’ or ‘conditional engagement’ based on the concept of balance of power will be more effective than ‘constructive engagement’. To ensure security in Asia, he suggests that a stable balance of power be built. Segal, G., ‘How insecure is Pacific Asia?’, *International Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 2 (1997), pp. 235–49.

accomplish. Japan is dreaming of *Pax Consortis*, a system of joint domination of East Asia by the US–Japanese security alliance.² Russia, whose centre is located west of the Urals, far from East Asia, is relatively free from the power competition among the major powers in East Asia. However, it has a dream of expanding its influence into the Asia–Pacific area and is preparing to intervene in the regional strategic environment as a ‘balancer’.

Situated at the geographic centre of East Asia, Korea is a relatively small nation. It is divided and suffers from intra-national conflict. Because of the Korean Peninsula’s strategic location and relative weakness, stability there is destined to be strongly affected by the balance of power between the great powers. At the same time, because of its location, Korea may play a very positive role as an ‘inside balancer’. Whether it becomes a disturber of regional stability or a stabilizing influence depends largely on the policy visions of the powers concerned and the strategic wisdom of the Korean leadership.

The following sections lay down the logical framework and examine the factual basis to support this argument.

II. *Pax Americana*

Unlike those countries which have evolved from traditional monarchies, the United States is an artificially created nation designed to fulfil the idea, revolutionary at that time, of a liberal democracy. ‘All men are created equal.’ Individual freedom, a pluralistic political system and a social order based on free contracts between its constituents formed the ideological core.

Liberal democracy also characterizes the United States’ foreign policy. In the 20th century the United States fought World War I and World War II to preserve it. Even though its foreign policy has shifted between isolation and engagement,³ for the past 200 years the USA has been basically guided by liberal democratic idealism. To understand US foreign policy, it is essential to understand its ideological commitment. The United States will pursue its goal of fostering a worldwide democratic community under its leadership in the post-cold war era just as it did before. The fact that it won three consecutive wars against totalitarianism (if the cold war is included) has given its leaders a strong confidence in their belief in liberal democracy. This confidence is now reflected in the dream of *Pax Americana*.

The goal of *Pax Americana* is to create a community of free-market democracies. To achieve this, the United States is trying to convert all nations to liberal democracies, first engaging with the ‘target’ nations and then following

² Inoguchi, T., *Japan’s Foreign Policy in an Era of Global Change* (Pinter: London, 1993), pp. 171–76. Inoguchi suggests 4 scenarios for Japan’s future course: (a) *Pax Americana*, phase 2; (b) *Pax Ameriponica*; (c) *Pax Consortis*; and (d) *Pax Nipponica*. In a recent article he concluded that *Pax Consortis* is the most popular but *Pax Americana*, phase 2, the most feasible. Inoguchi, T., ‘Japan’s foreign policy under US unipolarity: coping with uncertainty and swallowing some bitterness’, *Asian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 6, no. 2 (Dec. 1998), pp. 1–20.

³ Frank L. Klingberg found that from 1776 to 1940 US foreign policy oscillated between periods of introversion (averaging 21 years) and extroversion (averaging 27 years). Klingberg, F. L., ‘The historical alteration of moods in American foreign policy’, *World Politics*, Jan. 1952.

up with ‘sticks and carrots’ to bring about this ‘conversion’. This, somewhat simplified, is the post-cold war US policy of engagement and enlargement.⁴ To carry it out, the United States is ready to use its unmatched military supremacy combined with the strongest economic base in the world.

With the help of Western democratic nations, the USA has successfully converted most of the former communist nations in Eastern Europe into democracies. The mission in Europe is almost accomplished. On the other hand, in East Asia ‘conversion’ has not been so successful. To begin with, the United States encountered China’s resistance.⁵ China, a gigantic socialist nation, is too big and strong for the United States to handle alone. Thus it has ‘invited’ Japan as a partner in approaching China very cautiously and prudently under an overall policy of ‘conditional engagement’.⁶

III. The Japanese concept of *Pax Consortis*

Since the 19th century Japan has dreamed of creating a region-wide empire which it refers to as the ‘Great East Asia co-prosperity sphere’. Imperial Japan wished to divide the world into two camps—the Western, to be managed by the Western powers, and the Eastern, to be led by Japan. The Pacific War was fought to fulfil this dream.

After its defeat Japan realized that it was wiser to cooperate with the USA than to fight it. Accordingly it modified its idea of monopolistic, hegemonic control of East Asia into a joint plan for the management of security in East Asia. The former plan was referred to as *Pax Nipponica* and the new as *Pax Ameriponica*. According to the new scheme, the United States was to provide military supremacy while Japan was to exert its economic influence. In this context, the 1997 revised Guidelines for US–Japan Defense Cooperation⁷ could

⁴ The White House, ‘A national security strategy of engagement and enlargement’, Washington, DC, Feb. 1995. This declaration has become a new guideline for US foreign policy in the post-cold war era. It declares 3 goals—(a) to enhance US security, (b) to promote prosperity at home, and (c) to promote democracy globally. To pursue these goals the US Government officially declared that it would use its unopposed military supremacy and the strongest economy in the world.

⁵ The USA doubts China’s willingness to accommodate long-held US interests. One report states that ‘the primary threat is that China will seek to dominate economic and security affairs in Asia to the exclusion of the US and that, in the long run, it may be capable of doing so’. Holmes, K. R. and Moore, T. G. (eds), *Restoring American Leadership* (Heritage Foundation: Washington, DC, 1996), p. 19. On the other hand, Chinese ideologues suspect that the USA is waging another cold war against China. Shinn, J. (ed.), *Weaving the Net: Conditional Engagement with China* (Council on Foreign Relations: New York, 1996), p. 135. There are different views of possible Sino-US rivalry. Brzezinski considers that ‘greater China’s geopolitical influence is not necessarily incompatible with America’s strategic interest in a stable, pluralistic Eurasia’. Brzezinski, Z., ‘A geostrategy for Eurasia’, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 5 (Sep./Oct. 1997), p. 61.

⁶ On China’s resistance, see Shambaugh, D., ‘Growing strong: China’s challenge to Asian security’, *Survival*, vol. 36, no. 2 (summer 1994); and Wortzel, L. M., ‘China pursues traditional great power status’, *Orbis*, vol. 38, no. 2 (spring 1994). On the US conditional engagement policy, see Shinn (note 5); and Nye, J. S., ‘China’s re-emergence and the future of Asia–Pacific’, *Survival*, vol. 39, no. 4 (winter 1997/98), pp. 65–79. Nye clarifies conditional engagement as ‘from that position of strength [to] encourage China to define its interests in ways that could be compatible with ours’ (p. 76).

⁷ For the text, see US Department of Defense, News release, no. 507–97 (23 Sep. 1997), URL <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Sep1997/b09231997_bt50797b.html>.

be construed as a symbol that Japan has arrived at equal partnership with the United States for the joint leadership of East Asia along the lines of *Pax Ameriponica*. Will this be the end of Japan's aspirations? In essence, it will probably not be, since Japan eventually may move to form a global governing consortium comprising the great powers—the United States, the EU and others such as China and Russia. This is the Japanese dream of *Pax Consortis*.⁸

In the 1990s, Japan emerged as a new global economic power. Its per capita national income in 1997 was \$33 596, higher than those of the USA (\$30 321) and Germany (\$25 596).⁹ Japan could thus envision a new Asian world order in which it could play a leading role and may have begun to think of partially deviating from its close alliance with the United States. Liberating itself from critical dependency on the United States, Japan is trying to formulate a new regional order consisting of a joint strategy for East Asia crafted by all the concerned powers, including China and Russia. The long-term vision of *Pax Consortis*, an idea based on a condominium of the region, is an outgrowth of *Pax Ameriponica*. This vision is still developing and there is no consensus among the country's leaders. The rightists opt for monopolistic hegemony while the liberals prefer a coordinating peace system within which Japan will enjoy a leading role.

IV. The dream of restoring China-centrism

For more than 2000 years, roughly from the 6th century BC to the 18th century AD, China dominated Asia as sole hegemon. In East Asia, a hierarchical international order existed with China at the apex as the maintainer of the system. Only China was entitled to make the rules for the conduct of the nations in the system and to implement them. All others were to remain as tributary states.

Chinese supremacy in East Asia was shattered after the Opium War of 1848. The Western powers and Japan left China a semi-colonized nation. A century of national humiliation revived the Chinese ethos and after two revolutions, in 1912 and 1949, China finally regained its status as a great power in the 1980s. Although not yet fully industrialized, it is a formidable power with significant military capability. Today, it is difficult to imagine that China can be denied the role of a key constituent in East Asian power politics.

China denies the universality of liberal democratic values.¹⁰ It has its own version of idealism, humanism and democracy. Emphasizing organic harmony rather than individual freedom, the Chinese envision a world of common moral principles which place greater value on the health of the broader community than on individual rights.

⁸ See note 2.

⁹ South Korea, Ministry of Finance and Economy, *Monthly Economy*, vol. 38, no. 1 (Jan. 1999), pp. 91–94.

¹⁰ Huntington, S. P., 'The West unique, not universal', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 75, no. 6 (Nov./Dec. 1996), pp. 28–46.

China will cooperate with the United States as long as the USA honours the Chinese political philosophy but it will not tolerate *Pax Americana*, which demands China's conversion into a Western-style democracy. As a result, China will keep a measured distance from the United States for the time being.

V. The emerging balance of power

Will China accept Japanese hegemony in East Asia? The short answer is 'never'. Will Japan be satisfied with a junior position in the traditional hierarchical tributary system of a China-centred order? Again, the answer is 'never'. It is therefore inevitable that the two major Asian powers will remain in a competitive relationship. Their rivalry will be the axis of future stability in East Asia. If they maintain a peaceful, cooperative relationship, East Asia will enjoy stable peace. If they do not, it will remain in a state of sustained tension.

It is inconceivable that Japan will cooperate with China for shared leadership in a regional peace system in East Asia. Japan chose to become a 'Western' nation, leaving its Asian neighbours behind in the 19th century. The *tatsu-a niu-yo* ('Escape from Asia, enter Europe') concept still remains in the psyche of the Japanese leadership. Furthermore, its Asian neighbours will not accept Japanese leadership. Even half a century after the end of Japanese colonialism, Japan still has not officially admitted its crimes against innocent victims in East Asia. Although it has made an effort to improve ties with South Korea, including a written apology, it has not yet made a region-wide apology.

Japan will probably keep close cooperative ties with the United States. It is the most practical way for it to maintain its security from a potential Chinese threat and enjoy economic prosperity. Thus, the alliance with the United States is the most likely choice for Japan. The United States will almost certainly remain in Asia and continue to try to transform China into a democratic partner to fulfil the dream of *Pax Americana*.

Considering the different aspirations and dreams of the three big powers—the United States, China and Japan—the most probable picture of the future political structure is a non-institutionalized peace system sustained by a multi-lateral balance of power among them. For the time being, the balance will remain stable, since no nation can easily disrupt it. However, there is a new contingency—Russian participation in this balance-of-power system.

VI. Russia's role as balancer

Russia was once the leading contender for global hegemony against the United States. It is now transforming its old system of a totalitarian planned economy into a democracy with a free-market economy. While it is temporarily suffering hardship as a result of this transition and has only limited scope to exert influence in world power politics, it is only a matter of time before it regains its status of a global power.

The fact that the centre of Russian power is located west of the Urals gives its decision makers some freedom of choice. Russia could intervene in a power competition in East Asia or it could withdraw from the region without any serious damage to its power status. This very fact, however, also constrains its ability to exert influence on the nations in the region.¹¹

It can be assumed that in the years to come Russia will try to play the role of 'outside balancer' in the East Asian balance-of-power system.¹² This role, although it might appear insignificant, will be critical to the management of regional stability.

If Russia sides with the US–Japanese alliance, China will be surrounded by a triple alliance, isolated and possibly deprived of the chance to re-emerge as a superpower. Cut off from the sources of modern technology, it will not be able to sustain a high economic growth rate and catch up with other powers. On the other hand, if Russia allies itself with China, China's influence will be greatly enhanced and a tight balance-of-power system will be put in place in East Asia. In this case tensions will increase and stability will be jeopardized.¹³

If Russia can bring the Korean Peninsula under its control, the entire regional balance will be changed. Russia's position will be enhanced from that of the outside balancer to that of a more active player. During the cold war the Soviet Union once attempted to extend its influence on the Korean Peninsula by helping its ally, North Korea, to 'liberate' the southern half of the peninsula. The situation today has changed drastically. North Korea has become too weak to achieve reunification on its own terms and too disloyal to Russia to allow Russian dominance on the peninsula.

There is another possibility: if Russia decides to forge close cooperative relations with a new Korea reunified by South Korea, quite a different picture will emerge. A reunified Korea may wish to play the role of 'inside balancer' in the United States–China–Japan balance-of-power system and may wish to cooperate with Russia, the outside balancer, since there must be a convergence of interests between the inside and outside balancers.

¹¹ Russia's goals, means and constraints are well analysed in Harada, C., *Russia and Northeast Asia*, Adelphi Paper no. 310 (International Institute for Strategic Studies: London, 1997).

¹² For a supportive analysis of Russia's balancing role in a multilateral power balance in North-East Asia, see [Formulation on the new security order in Northeast Asia and the role of Russia], *Chuyo Kukje Munje Bunseok* [Analysis of major international issues] (Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, Seoul), 2 Sep. 1998.

¹³ [Russo-Chinese strategic partnership: prognosis], *Chuyo Kukje Munje Bunseok*, 9 Sep. 1998. The authors predict that Russia and China will develop strategic partnership relations for shared security interests in the multilateral power balance in North-East Asia. For a comprehensive review of the development of Sino-Russian military cooperation and its implications for the stability of the North-East Asian regional security system, see Tae-Ho Kim, [Sino-Russian military cooperation and Northeast Asian security], *Jeonryak Nonchong* (Korean Research Institute of Strategy, Seoul), vol. 6, no. 1 (1998), pp. 157–214. The author concludes that close military cooperation between China and Russia enhances the influence of both nations, producing synergistic effects.

VII. Conclusions: Korea in the new balance-of-power system

Korea was colonized by Japan and divided by the United States and the Soviet Union. It lost an opportunity to reunify in 1950 because of Chinese intervention. In essence, it has been victimized by the surrounding powers for the past century.

Over the past 50 years, the Korean people have struggled to regain their national pride and to transform their nation into a prosperous, independent, sovereign state secure from external threat. Through their efforts they built a small but prosperous democratic state, the Republic of Korea, in the southern half of the peninsula. Today they aspire to bring their 25 million fellow Koreans in the north into a more prosperous era, akin to what has been achieved in the south.

Koreans are fully aware that their dream will be realized only when there is no intervention by the surrounding powers, especially China and the USA. South Korea is carefully adjusting its foreign policy in order not to jeopardize its relations with all its neighbours. It is maintaining a 'good-neighbourly' policy in order to create a political environment favourable to its efforts to achieve national reunification. It will maintain its alliance with the USA in order to counterbalance potential Chinese and Russian intervention. It will also not antagonize China and Russia. Even after South Korea achieves reunification, the new Korea will maintain its alliance with the USA. Basically the same conditions will be needed to protect its sovereign status—a close alliance with the United States and amicable relations with China and Russia.

If the United States and China maintain friendly, cooperative relations, Korea's strategic manoeuvring room will increase, but if tension develops between them Korea will be in a difficult position. Stability in the East Asian regional system has critical implications for Korea's independence.

If Russia decides to play a positive role to strengthen stability in the East Asian peaceful balance, Korea will welcome it and will eagerly collaborate with its northern neighbour. Russia, the outside balancer, and Korea, the inside balancer, will easily find many common tasks, since they share the common interest of maintaining peace in East Asia.

At present, all four powers surrounding the Korean Peninsula are dealing with the Korean issue in relation to their individual designs of acquiring a dominant position in the region. The United States has just begun to engage with North Korea and improve its relations with the last communist country in Asia so that it can then extend its dominance over the two Koreas. China, on the other hand, maintains close ties with North Korea in order to deny control of it to any hostile power. China will never be bordered by any hostile power along the Yalu River. Russia wants to restore cooperative relations with North Korea in order to acquire a strategic foothold in the heart of the East Asian region.

What then should be South Korea's policy if it is to maintain its independence in such a strategic situation?

First, it should stick to the policy of the status quo. It should try to persuade North Korea to accept the peaceful coexistence of the two Koreas because a policy that aims to change the status quo will only increase the chances of major-power intervention.

Second, South Korea should maintain a close security alliance with the United States¹⁴ and close cooperative relations with Japan to deter Chinese and Russian intervention. It shares the same ideology with these two nations and if it is to keep its democratic system it needs their support.

Third, however, South Korea should maintain close, cooperative relations with China and Russia. It must avoid any ambiguous behaviour that could disturb the two giants to its north. It should convince China and Russia that it will not make any hostile move even after reunification. Korea should consider installing a self-imposed demilitarized zone on its territory along the borders with China and Russia and relocating US bases to the southern coastal area in order not to arouse the suspicions of the northern neighbours.

Fourth, in the meantime, South Korea should concentrate its efforts on improving its relations with North Korea. Continuing hostility between them will likely invite foreign intervention, which it wishes to avoid. South Korea wishes to resolve the inter-Korean conflict by itself and does not want to leave it in the hands of neighbouring powers. This is why it is reluctant to accept the idea, put forward by Japan, of a six-party conference. Once South Korea manages to produce an agreement with North Korea on peaceful coexistence, however, it will invite all four surrounding powers, including Japan and Russia, to guarantee the peace agreement.¹⁵

Needless, to say, South Koreans dream of reunification at the earliest possible time. Pragmatic considerations, however, dictate a policy of peaceful coexistence for the time being. South Korea is afraid that attempting to hasten reunification might disrupt not only local stability on the Korean Peninsula but also the regional power balance and thus invite negative sanctions by some of the neighbouring powers. It is therefore currently putting more emphasis on 'management of division' than on reunification. In brief, it should pursue reunification in such a way as not to jeopardize North-East Asian regional peace and stability.

¹⁴ The character of the alliance should, however, be changed from that of a 'threat-driven' one to a 'profit-generating' form which allows the partners greater independence. Pollack, J. D. and Young Koo Cha, *A New Alliance for the Next Century* (RAND: Santa Monica, Cal., 1995). The US Government recently declared its intention to keep the US military presence after reunification. US Secretary of Defense, 'The United States security strategy for the East Asia-Pacific region', 23 Nov. 1998, p. 62, URL <<http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/easr98/index.html>>. For the rationale for sustaining the US-Korean alliance after reunification, see Jin-Hyun Paik, 'ROK-US alliance in the post-unification era', eds Kyung-Won Kim and Sung-Joo Han, *Managing Change on the Korean Peninsula* (Seoul Press: Seoul, 1998), pp. 227-41.

¹⁵ On 16 Apr. 1996, the presidents of South Korea and the USA jointly proposed 4-party talks on a new inter-Korean peace system to replace the current armistice agreement. China was invited but Japan and Russia were excluded. Russia strongly resented its exclusion. The 4th meeting of the talks was held on 21-22 Jan. 1999. So far there has been no significant progress.