



History and Geo-strategy in East Asia

by Michael A. McDevitt

Over the past 100 years, Northeast Asia has been plagued with great power rivalry and conflict. Today this unhappy history, and the centrality of Japan's militaristic past to this history, continues to be an issue. The current disagreements between Japan and both Korea and China over its revisionist history text book continue to unsettle relations among the three East Asian neighbors. Japan's inability to satisfactorily atone for past wrongs is an important impediment to long-term regional reconciliation, and unfortunately provides ammunition to those who would argue that Japan's past is prologue for future militarist behavior. This is flat wrong.

Trying to forecast the future using historical analogy is always problematic. This case is no exception. But Japan's trouble in dealing with its past does not mean that the Japanese are "closet militarists" itching to replay the first half of last century. But, suppose for a moment that Japan does harbor a desire to return to its militaristic past, which I believe is inconceivable; would it be able to again dominate East Asia? I believe that the geo-strategic, demographic, and alliance realities of Northeast Asia today are so different from the 1930s that a remilitarized Japan could not threaten the security of its neighbors in a meaningful way and historically-based arguments used to buttress or rationalize strategic options and power relations for the future are largely irrelevant.

Examining Northeast Asia's troubled past reveals that most of the factors that led to such an unhappy 20th century are not relevant in the 21st century. China will not be weak; it will almost certainly be unified and strong. Korea will be a far cry from the hermit kingdom of the late 19th century, ripe for imperialist plucking. (This is true whether it is the two Koreas of today, or in the future one Korea.) Both Russia and Japan have left their imperialist predilections in the past, and it is hard to imagine a 21st century return even if democracy falters in Russia. The economic theories that help justify imperialist activities of the 19th and first half of the 20th century have been long discredited and supplanted. One hundred years ago no international institution with the weight and authority of the United Nations existed. Today, the United Nations, for all its imperfections, is a court of world opinion that has the ability to punish aggressors.

Each of the regional powers is either satisfied with existing frontiers or appears willing to be patient and seek a diplomatic solution to unresolved problems related to reunification or competing claims over islands. Taiwan is an obvious exception to this generalization, but even in this case, China's avowed policy choice is for a peaceful resolution.

Considering the distribution of conventional military power in Northeast Asia, we see that a reversal in military fortunes

between China and Russia has taken place. Today China is in the ascendancy, while Russia is the "sick man" of Northeast Asia. But unlike a century ago when China was the "sick man," today Russia's neighbors are not poised to bite off the best portions of the Russian Far East. This is so because of today's different diplomatic norms - imperialism is out of fashion - but also because Russia's nuclear arsenal guarantees continued territorial integrity. And, finally the world's strongest military power, the United States, is present in Northeast Asia in a militarily significant way.

In the past, it was the political and military weakness of Korea and China that created instability. Korea was unable to defend itself against its neighbors and when its great power patron, China, was also militarily enfeebled, Russia and Japan tried to impose their own brand of stability. As a result, Korea was either a semi-vassal hermit kingdom, occupied, or divided for the entire 20th century. It is hard to imagine how these factors could reemerge in the 21st century.

Early in the 20th century, Japan was the rising power, relatively much stronger than anyone else in the region, facing very weak permanently stationed military power from colonial states outside the region. Today, it is the military potential of China to influence events beyond its contiguous neighborhood that generates the most long-term concern. But, significantly China is not in the midst of a militarily impotent region as Japan was 100 years ago. To the contrary; China's military potential is largely unrealized and well balanced by both the U.S. and countries that can defend themselves on its periphery.

The first half of the last century witnessed a militarily unstable region, as Japan was attempting to provide its own brand of unilateral stability. Today the region is militarily stable because deterrence continues to be effective on the Korean Peninsula, and because beyond Korea a de facto condominium of power exists between the United States and China. Each of these countries has a geographic sphere of military influence. China's sphere is the continent of Asia. Its still very large army, its short-range air force, and essentially coastal defense navy militarily guarantee China's frontiers and intimidate the nations with which it shares those borders.

The United States preserves its military sphere of influence through an alliance system on the rim land of East Asia that enables militarily credible forward deployed forces that are able to: (1) thwart attempts at aggression in South Korea; (2) defeat attempts to invade from the continent across the sea to another state; and (3) defeat attempts to invade from one island or archipelagic state to another.

Taiwan is on the seam between these two spheres of military influence. It is far enough off-shore from China to be out of reach of China's army; a situation that has existed for the past 100 years. For the last 50 of those years it has been the naval power of

the United States, deployed from facilities in Japan, that has kept Taiwan beyond China's reach. This is one aspect of history that is unlikely to change until Taipei and Beijing reach an understanding on how to reconcile a vibrant democracy on Taiwan and growing Chinese impatience for "reunification of the motherland."

Because the United States stands ready to prevent Taiwan from being militarily intimidated into reunification, Beijing needs to appreciate that the military option remains essentially foreclosed. The only course open to Beijing is to rely on political, social, and economic initiatives to make the people of Taiwan see advantages of once and for all removing the threat of war by reaching some sort of political accommodation with China. This will undoubtedly take many years, probably decades, and may not transpire until China's political system changes, but it will have to happen. One aspect of history that is relevant to the future is the likelihood that China will continue to cling fiercely to the notion that reunification with Taiwan is the only way to make China whole.

I began by talking about Japan and history and ended by addressing China and the future. This is entirely appropriate. This latest diplomatic flap about Japan's past, while important in its own right, must not overshadow the most important geo-strategic issue for the future - the rise of China. That involves recognizing that the modern history of Northeast Asia provides no reliable guide for a future that involves a strong economically vibrant China. In the modern era of Northeast Asia that is historical terra incognita.

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