

## **Geopolitical Risk on the Korean Peninsula — Implications for the Japan-U.S. Alliance —**

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### **Introduction**

Following the North Korea's intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test on November 29, 2017, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted a resolution on December 23, 2017 to impose new sanctions and to limit North Korea's oil imports, making it clear its stance against nuclear tests and ICBM tests. On April 21, 2018, as China suggested for the first time that it might suspend the supply of oil to Pyongyang, North Korea announced its intention to suspend the test-firing of ICBMs and dismantle nuclear test facilities saying there was no longer a necessity to conduct further nuclear testing. The announcement was a prologue to a historic meeting between the top leaders of the United States and North Korea on June 12, 2018. Despite such positive developments, there is a growing risk that the situation on the Korean Peninsula will become increasingly fluid going forward and it will be very difficult, even for authorities, to predict what will happen in the future.

Nicholas Spykman, American political scientist and geopolitical theorist, said that when the peace and security of a nation is threatened, the "fundamental and permanent factor" that decisively affect the relationship between nations is "geography" of the world's continents.<sup>1</sup> Spykman also said that geopolitical "areas" are determined by "significant changes at the heartland of power," in addition to the general geography indicated on their maps.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the rise and

fall of nations over the course of time significantly influence the concept of geopolitical “areas.” For example, the evolution of technology has been transforming the potential of “places” where the power is projected and has brought about the “Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA),” and it has had significant influence on not only how things may unfold in the battlefield but also how people live their lives.

The emergence of weapons of mass destruction, i.e. nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, led to a closer diplomatic engagement between South Korea and North Korea that had been in a state of armistice, resulting in massive changes in the political power positions of the United States and other countries. Through the development of weapons of mass destruction, North Korea came to have the political influence impacting the “geographical” space of East Asia, and become a catalyst to shift the diplomacy and security policies of the United States, which found itself within the range of potential attacks by North Korea.

## **1. Nuclear Weapons in the Korean Peninsula and Geopolitics**

Historically the Korean Peninsula has suffered repeated ravages of war. They include the campaigns of *Bunroku* and *Keicho*, the dispatch of troops to Korea led by Hideyoshi Toyotomi of Japan in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the Korean War, which was fought between South Korea with the support of the United Nations forces that mainly comprise U.S. forces, and North Korea with the support of China’s volunteer forces. Unfazed by its unfortunate history, North Korea continues to challenge the existing world order by playing a dangerous game using weapons of mass destruction, while sticking to the guiding principle of “*Juche*” self-reliance philosophy. Despite political and diplomatic hardships caused by U.N. sanctions, North Korea seems unwilling to give up on its development of long-range ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons that can be mounted on them. This shows a strong resolve to rise to the same position as the superpower, the United States.

There are three angles that are useful in examining the situation: (1) tactical superiority of a nuclear power; (2) technical difficulties in abolishing nuclear forces; and (3) necessity to give careful consideration for “Post-Heroic Warfare” and its political implications

First, in a war where conventional forces are to be used, fighting begins when one party becomes confident of its victory. However, in a war where nuclear weapons might be used, the destructive power of nuclear weapons makes nations be hesitant of starting a war, or at least induces them to significantly delay the start of a war, because they cannot easily be convinced of their victory.<sup>3</sup> North Korea’s nuclear weapons development plan, which is distinctly different from the nuclear ambitions of third world countries, whose aim is to effectively defeat the opponent in armed conflicts, is steadily going forward as they wisely study the volatility of international affairs. North Korea is trying to maximize the tactical advantage of its nuclear program by combining the development of tactical-level nuclear weapons with its acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, albeit few in number. North Korea’s nuclear program illustrates its cunningness and calculation.

Next, although North Korea’s military capabilities are quite old-fashioned and vulnerable to airborne threats, the country has been successful in covering these vulnerabilities by adopting tactics that will make it difficult for an adversary to conduct “targeting”, an operation which must precedes strategic base attacks, by loading the ballistic missiles on the transporter-erector-launcher (TEL) and taking advantage of the rugged and complex terrain. Thanks to the high-precision guided weapons and sophisticated data collection capabilities we have at our disposal, it is not impossible to work out a plan of operation to directly attack and eliminate the threats, but we also need to consider the possibility of massive counterattack that may involve the use of weapons of mass destruction. Also, it is imperative to examine the possible risks and to conduct a cost-benefit analysis, which could turn out to be a very stressful task.

Lastly, the United States seems to adhere to the policy of “all options are on the table” toward the North Korea. In February 2018, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph F. Dunford, Jr. didn’t directly refer to the pros and cons of a military strike against North Korea but left the option open to send ground troops by using the expression “nasty war.”<sup>4</sup> However, as the “political climate that is intolerant of wartime casualties” is gaining ground across advanced countries, can policymakers really be trusted to make the right decision at the right time, as to whether or not to launch a military operation that could risk a massive loss of human life? In fact, in the event of a military operation, even on a limited scale, North Korea will likely to strike back by “launching reflexive counteroffensives against South Korea with massive firepower and a hailstorm of ballistic missiles as soon as it detect an attack by the United States” and/or “ballistic missile strikes against the United States or its allies, or artillery bombardments against South Korea on a limited scale.” Furthermore, amid the political and social environment intolerant of casualties, the political and diplomatic risks of embarking on a military operation are increasingly seen as unacceptable. This means that if North Korea takes advantage of the tide of Post-Heroic Warfare” that is permeating through advanced nations, North Korea may be able to pursue its own provocative style of diplomacy and get away with it.

The United States and North Korea started negotiations on Pyongyang’s denuclearization after the first-ever U.S.-North Korea summit in June 2018 with the hope that denuclearization is actually doable. However, in the event that negotiations fell through and it turned out the threat of North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction could not be removed, the international community might have no choice but to give a tacit nod to North Korea as a de facto nuclear power. In the 1960s, André Beaufre, director of the Institute for Strategic Studies of France, argued that “if the increase in the number of nuclear states enhances stability of the world, then the more proliferation of nuclear weapons, the

better,”<sup>5</sup> adding that multilateral deterrence by nuclear weapons may be considered to be rational if we are to pursue strategic stability. It does not seem possible that North Korea, if officially recognized as a nuclear state, will play a role in multilateral deterrence along with other nuclear powers like China and Russia, and attempt to change the existing international order as a member of an alliance of nuclear powers. Beaufre restricted the establishment of multilateral deterrence to the scope among rational states that can fulfill their international responsibility, and he would never tolerate the unlimited and irresponsible diffusion of nuclear weapons. The group of non-nuclear states in East Asia should block the emergence of multilateral deterrence by the group of these nuclear states willing to alter the status quo, in order to peacefully create peace and stability in the region.

## **2. Rimland and China**

The security environment on and around the Korean Peninsula has always been difficult. A principle reason for this is that the Korean Peninsula geographically borders on major powers like China and Russia, and it occupies part of the “Rimland,” which is a collective term for the coastal zone of the Eurasian Continent, including the Arctic Ocean. In 1942, Spykman emphasized the universal importance of the Rimland as a strategic place through the proposition that “Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; Who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world.”<sup>6</sup> He also argued that though the Rimland does not have the absolute geopolitical advantage like the Heartland, which is deemed impregnable, he recognized the strategic value of the Rimland, as it provides an invasion route to the Heartland and the Eurasian Continent, and believed that if the conditions are right, the Rimland alone is sufficient to meet the requirements to gain global hegemony. Spykman explained the strategic importance of the Korean Peninsula from the geopolitical point of view by drawing lessons from the history of past military conflicts. He came up with three factors that make the

Korean Peninsula geopolitically important. First, it provides the “route” for access to the Eurasian Continent by an external “challenger.” Second, it can serve as a buffer zone” once a strategic stability is achieved. Lastly, it can be used as a “bridgehead” for sea powers to exert influence on the continent.

There are two major access routes from the Korean Peninsula to the Eurasian Continent. One is characterized as a relatively narrow route along the eastern coast facing the Sea of Japan, which was taken by the troops led by Kiyomasa Kato that marched the Korean Peninsula northward in the campaign of *Bunroku* in 1592. The other is an easily accessible route that goes north through the peneplain on the west, which was used by the troops led by Yukinaga Konishi when he conquered Pyongyang around the same period. More than four centuries later, these routes are drawing attention again. They were highlighted in the speech by South Korean President Moon Jae-in on August 15, 2018, in which he proposed the creation of the East Asian railroad community.<sup>7</sup> The railroad routes running south and north to link the Korean Peninsula to the Eurasian Continent are now in place in the eastern and western parts of the Korean Peninsula. If the south and north railroads passing through the Korean Peninsula are linked in the future, a new trade route to Europe by way of Russia and China bordering on the Korean Peninsula will become a reality. Looking back in history, the ultimate reason Hideyoshi Toyotomi sent troops to Korea was to establish a great unified country in Southeast Asia by conquering Korea and the Ming dynasty and then by bringing India, the Philippines and Taiwan under Japan’s control.<sup>8</sup> The dispatch of troops to Korea was just the intermediate goal to secure the access route to the Eurasian Continent. While the east-west route that runs from south to north is geographically extremely important from security and strategic perspectives, as it provides a path that connects the Rimland to the European Continent, it appears South Korea only wants to proceed with the plan in a matter-of-factly and to focus on its economic benefits.

The construction of Gyeongui Line on the side of the Yellow Sea, which will be used as an industrial and distribution route linking Seoul, Kaesong and Pyongyang, is good for China, because it will provide convenient access to the Korean Peninsula and help China economically. However, given the fact that the same route was used for invasion in the past, it is not hard to imagine how South Korea's economic development efforts might worry China for security reasons. When Yukinaga Konishi conquered Pyongyang in 1592 in the course of Hideyoshi Toyotomi's troop dispatch to Korea, the Ming dynasty immediately sent 5,000 soldiers despite the fact that the Ming dynasty and the Yi dynasty of Korea didn't have a solid relationship of trust. In the latter half of the 1950s, when the U.N. forces approached Pyongyang, China, acutely aware of North Korea's role as the shield for national defense, dispatched its troops to North Korea in haste.<sup>9</sup> In view of these developments, China seems to have had a good understanding of the geographical vulnerability on the Korean Peninsula throughout history.

Halford J. Mackinder, who is often referred to as the originator of geopolitics, defined the concept of "Heartland" as areas located in the central region of the world, and argued that confrontation between land powers occupying the global island and sea powers might develop in the future. On the other hand, Spykman raised the important issue of the Rimland, which serves as a buffer zone between continental states and maritime states that form the axis of confrontation as pointed out by Mackinder.<sup>10</sup> Historically, the Korean Peninsula has been the buffer zone for China that ensures its survival and has remained to be a vitally important region, as it provides an access route that may be used to exert direct influence. China has semi-permanently retained the Korean Peninsula as an "outlander" instead of directly ruling it like it did to other countries of barbarians on the frontier, in order to maintain its humanosphere.

### **3. Aphorism of Geopolitics**

In September 2014, political scientist John J. Mearsheimer harshly criticized the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that started in 1999. He argued that “the United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the crisis. The root of the trouble is NATO enlargement, the central element of a larger strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia’s orbit and integrate it into the West,” criticizing the alliance policy of NATO member states, including the United States, as not appropriate.<sup>11</sup> The criticism is tantamount to saying that the action taken by Russia in the Crimean Peninsula in response to the West’s successive inroads into Eastern Europe, which Russia considers to be its humanosphere, was a reasonable one from a geopolitical perspective.

However, no one should underestimate the fact that Russia is a country that has extended its territory by about thirtyfold by 1945, through repeated “expansion and contraction” since Ivan III became the Grand Prince of Moscow in the 15th century,<sup>12</sup> and has historically occupied the Heartland, which is known as “impregnable fortress”, while heading off the challenges by Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolf Hitler. Therefore, the criticism by Mearsheimer may be considered to be an aphorism to East European and Baltic countries which were unyoked from the former Soviet Union after the end of the Cold War. After being forced to swallow the “contraction” after the Cold War, Russia is reverting to the “expansion” phase just 20 years later, seeing the Ukrainian crisis as an opportunity.

China and Russia are two separate countries that belong to different geopolitical categories, so it might not be appropriate to apply the same hypothesis, but we need to learn something from what came out of the Ukrainian crisis. If the Korean Peninsula is presumed to be the buffer zone for China’s own humanosphere, relevant countries should place emphasis on the complex calculation and discretion with a worst-case scenario in mind, let alone close sharing of information and communication when they plan to exert new



influence on the Eurasian Continent from the Korean Peninsula in order not to trigger imprudent reactions or interventions due to China's wariness and suspicions.<sup>13</sup>

In particular, in the event that the processes for the unification of the Korean Peninsula begin, including a declaration of an end to the Korean War and conclusion of a peace treaty, the U.S. forces stationed in South Korea, the main component of the U.N. forces to prepare for an emergency on the Korean Peninsula, will be required to redefine its mission and roles, while paying attention to relevant countries, including China. Under these circumstances, one cannot rule out the possibility the U.S. forces in South Korea will further strengthen its role as the "bridgehead" to secure the access route to the Eurasian Continent and to exert global influence from the Rimland through strategic deployment of its forces, in the region of inherent instability where land powers and sea powers intersect.

## **Conclusion**

The alliance with the United States is a cornerstone of Japan's national security, and Japan needs to continue monitoring the situation on the Korean Peninsula in a calm and rational manner, while giving due consideration to the above-mentioned variables. If the status and roles of the U.S. forces in South Korea are to be redefined in accordance with the evolving situations on the Korean Peninsula, a similar wave may reach Japan that will necessitate the redefining of the roles and mission of the U.S. forces in Japan, in view of developments with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. In that case, it would be necessary to prepare for a movement similar to the redefinition of the Japan-U.S. alliance that took place in 1996 following the end of the Cold War, while bearing in mind that the discussion over how to maintain predominance of Japan and the United States in emerging domains such as cyberspace and outer space might accelerate.

“The future needs the past,”<sup>14</sup> as the saying goes. In order to ensure Japan’s continued existence and future prosperity, every citizen of Japan is now called on to take a hard look at the geopolitical situations surrounding Japan, and to make a conscious effort to nurture a stable, strategic environment worthy of a sovereign nation, by drawing lessons from Japan’s rich history and tradition, and leaning about the essence of the nation.

Additionally, those of us who are directly involved in the defense of Japan in particular, should always remember the old dictum by Napoleon: “the policy of a state lies in its geography.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Spykman, translated by Shinji Okuyama, “*Heiwa no Chiseigaku – Amerika Sekai Senryaku no Genten (The Geography of the Peace – The Origin of the American Global Strategy)*,” Fuyo Shobo Shuppan, 2008, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> Ditto, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Waltz, “The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May be Better,” *Adelphi Papers* No.171, 1981, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> “Top US General Warns of ‘Nasty’ Korea Conflict, Stresses Diplomacy,” AFP, February 6, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> General Beaufre, *Dissuasion et Strategie*, Librairie Armand Colin, 1964, p. 106.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Spykman, “*Heiwa no Chiseigaku – Amerika Sekai Senryaku no Genten (The Geography of the Peace – The Origin of the American Global Strategy)*,” p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> The Republic of Korea Cheong Wa Dai, Address by President Moon Jae-in on Korea’s 73<sup>rd</sup> Liberation Day, August 15, 2018

<sup>8</sup> Michihiro Ishihara, “*Bunroku-Keichō no Eki (Bunroku-Keicho Campaigns)*,” Hanawa Shobō, 1963, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Fuji Kamiya, “*Chosen Senso (the Korean War)*,” Chuko Shinsho, 1966, p. 108.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas Spykman, “*Heiwa no Chiseigaku – Amerika Sekai Senryaku no Genten (The Geography of the Peace – The Origin of the American Global Strategy)*,” p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault,” *Foreign Affairs*, Sep/Oct, 2014, p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> Jun Nagashima, “Sobieto/Roshia no Kyoji ni Kansuru Chiseigakuteki Ichi Kosatsu (A Geopolitical Study on the Soviet/Russian Threats),” *Hoyu*. Vol. 18 No. 2, July 1992, pp. 25–39.

<sup>13</sup> Fuji Kamiya, “*Chosen Senso (the Korean War)*,” Chuko Shinsho, 1966, p. 105.

<sup>14</sup> Michael H. Hunt, “American Decline and The Great Debate: A Historical Perspective,” *SAIS Review*, Summer-Fall 1990, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> Tilo Schabert, *How World Politics is Made: France and the Reunification of Germany*, University of Missouri Press, 1848, p. 167.