
EVOLUTION OF THE POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC
SITUATION IN THE NORTH PACIFIC

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Despite the end of the Cold War, the North Pacific Basin remains one of the world's potential flashpoints. A Korean proverb describes their country as a shrimp surrounded by four whales. Those whales are the United States, China, Japan and the Soviet Union/CIS whose interests overlap in the North Pacific. Add to the competing interests of these four powers the still unresolved conflict between the two Korean states and the possibility that North Korea might be developing nuclear weapons and the fragility of this region can be seen.

In Europe the end of the Second World War gave rise to a bipolar world the US/USSR, Capitalism/communism, EC/Comecon, Nato/Warsaw Pact. This division survived until the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In East Asia and the Pacific a different picture emerged from the end of World War II. In Asia the US was the victor of the war — an American victory gave rise to the Pacific becoming an American lake. Unlike Germany which was divided between the four western powers, Japan was occupied solely by the US. Japan itself lay in ruins, the victim of the first nuclear attack in history. China, nominally one of the victors of the war, was engulfed in civil war. Stalin's Russia had little real interest in the Far East. US dominance of the region was to last well into the 1960's and even 70's. Even today the US is the only superpower in the region, commanding an unrivalled combination of military, political, diplomatic and naval power.

Today the Pacific Basin is the third pillar of the world economy alongside Western Europe and northern America. Indeed many observers speculate that the next century will be the Pacific century after the European and American centuries. The economic growth of East Asia has not been confined to Japan and South Korea, but spread to the Asian NIC'S, ASEAN and China. Thailand and Malaysia are but just the latest examples. This phenomenal economic growth however has not been matched by the growth of regional associations such as the EC. In large part this is because of the continuing fear

of Japan. The contrast with post-war Germany is very marked here. ASEAN is the once exception to the absence of regional associations. After 1930 Japan sought a regional dominance through the Greater East Asia Coprosperity Sphere. The experience of that period has not been forgotten. That historical experience has been reinforced by fear of Japan's economic predominance in East Asia where it has long been the largest foreign investor and aid donor.

Japan's return to economic prominence coincided with the Korean War, a war which also witnessed the first real challenge to American hegemony in the region, which came not from the USSR, but from China.

Political stability and regional security have been the necessary underpinnings for the economic progress of East Asia for almost two decades. The end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and China's 'Open Door' policy since the later 1970's have made it possible for virtually all the countries of the region to prosper in an atmosphere of undisturbed peace. The success of ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), one of the few lasting regional associations in the Third World, has also made an important contribution to regional security. But by the late 1980's it was becoming increasingly clear that several unsettling factors posed a threat to the regional order and balance of power that had been taken for granted in previous years. The coincidence of these challenges to the regional order could prove profoundly unsettling in the 1990's.

The coming 100 years have frequently been dubbed 'the century of Asia' and 'the Pacific Century' by an America that now does more trade in the region than with western Europe. But if the Pacific Century is really to blossom, it is going to have to enjoy continued political stability and regional security. In the 1990's however the region will have to contend with several looming threats to its well-being. Amongst the new challenges to regional peace that can presently be identified are the decline of United States power in the region, the perceived threat seen by many nations in China's military modernisation and new internal hardline, the dangers of a militarily resurgent Japan, political instability and insurgency in the Philippines, and the strategic vulnerability of the ministates of the South Pacific. If this list were not long enough the region's three chronically intractable flashpoints — Korea, Taiwan and Cambodia not only remain, but in the case of Cambodia and Taiwan give all the appearance of becoming more serious problems in the nineties.

The Asia-Pacific region despite its much vaunted economic progress still contains many grave economic inequalities and problems that help to fuel

political instability and insecurity. Disparities of wealth and living standards between countries as diverse as Japan and Vietnam, Indonesia and Australia are far greater than those that prevail within Europe. There are economic problems, such as fear of domination by Japan, the major economic power in the region. This is keenly felt in Southeast Asia, but is also never far below the surface in Korea and China. When the Europeans began to fear the 'American Challenge' in the 1950's, they banded together in the European Community. East Asians have so far shown no inkling to do so to meet the 'Japanese Challenge'.

But the political and security differences between Europe and East Asia are even more marked and contribute to the greater likelihood of insecurity and instability. Whereas in Europe peace and order has prevailed since the end of the Second World War as result of the division of the continent into two security alliances, NATO and the Warsaw Pact, each overseen by one of the superpowers, in East Asia and the Pacific international relations are far more complex and unsettling. There are no multilateral security alliances and the interests of four major actors — the United States, Russia, Japan and China — converge and conflict with each other and those of a myriad of smaller states, most of them nonaligned. Unlike Europe, the whole history of the region in modern times has been punctuated by upheavals prompting major regional realignments — the Sino-Soviet split of 1960, Indonesia's major domestic and international volte-face in 1965-66, the Sino-American rapprochement of 1972 and the Sino-Soviet detente of 1989 being the most spectacular shifts. Similar dramatic political realignments are not only likely, but probable in the 90's.

For the first quarter of a century after the Second World War, the predominance of the United States in the Pacific/East Asia region was unquestioned. But by the 1970's three other major actors were making their presence felt in the regional stage. The Soviet Union, long preoccupied with the strategic threat it perceived in Europe, began to build up its forces in the Pacific. By the end of the decade its Far Eastern fleet based at Vladivostok was already the largest of its four naval fleets posing a challenge to the naval supremacy hitherto enjoyed by the United States. Despite its still limited military and diplomatic role, Japan was also fast becoming a regional power, if only because of its growing economic might. Just as dramatic was China's emergence from the isolation of the Cultural Revolution and its headlong rush into the 'four modernisations'.

The emergence by the 1980's of three other major regional actors besides the United States has inevitably complicated the international relations of the region. By the end of the 1980's a further complication was signalled by the growing financial pressures on the US itself to scale down its global commitment to international security. US pressure on Japan to increase its regional security role increased markedly. When, in April 1988 the US launched a major aid initiative to bail out the Philippines economy, it turned to Japan to act as the major donor. Mr. Gorbachev's visit to Peking in May last year, and the subsequent Sino-Soviet rapprochement has also introduced further uncertainties into the region's politics.

China's rapid military modernisation in the eighties also introduced a new potentially destabilising factor into the region's international relations. Not only has the reach of China's strategic rocket forces matched that of the super-powers, but its conventional forces are also extending their reach. The most remarkable development in this field has been the growth of China's navy. Little more than a coastal defense force until the 1970's, in less than ten years China had developed a blue-water force that was able to project military power at considerable distance from the Chinese mainland. This force was seen in action for the first time in March 1988 when Chinese naval units engaged Vietnamese forces in the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Such gunboat diplomacy suggests that China is also developing the kind of forces that would be necessary for the more ambitious task on Taiwan if circumstances changed. With Hong Kong and Macao already set to return to China in the 1990's, Peking might well be tempted to undertake the final reunion of the Chinese motherland. Such a possibility would be enhanced if Taiwan indicated that it was going to ditch the ageing Kuomintang leadership and opt for full independence for the island. The consequences of such an action for regional security would be immense and would threaten to undermine the Sino-American rapprochement of the 1970's.

Another critical development in the late eighties, signalling further dramatic shifts in regional politics, was the Sino-Soviet summit of May 1989. The move is likely to have widespread implications for the region. In the shadow of the summit, two important political realignments took place with Indonesia announcing in February that it was normalising relations with China, severed since 1967, and Vietnam stating in March that it was withdrawing all its forces from Cambodia.

In the aftermath of the summit China's influence in the region is likely to grow. For decades the two superpowers have played 'the China card' against each other. After the summit, China's importance in the triangle will decline. Moreover, there has been a considerable reduction in tension along the Sino-Soviet border. For the first time in its forty years existence, China has achieved good relations with both the United States and the Soviet Union. Freed for the first time in its modern history of the constraints imposed by concern that one or other superpower might attack it, China is likely to emerge as an even more important power in Southeast Asia. This awakens considerable concern in the region, especially for Vietnam but also for several ASEAN countries including Indonesia and Malaysia. These countries have always feared that China would one day seek to exercise the same influence vis-a-vis Southeast Asia that the Soviet Union has traditionally enjoyed in Eastern Europe or the United States in central America.

Just as the European order in place since the end of the Second World War is in the process of breaking up, so less noticeably is East Asia's balance of power undergoing significant and far-reaching change. The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe has yet to find any real reflection in the Stalinist regimes of China, Vietnam and North Korea although Mongolia, the world's second oldest communist state, looks set to move towards some form of pluralism in the near future.

But, as in Europe, the steady reduction in tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the subsequent end of the Cold War, is resulting in a marked shift in the regional balance of power giving rise to fears amongst the smaller countries of East Asia that the superpowers are in the process of a disengagement from the region as radical as the departure of the European colonial powers after 1945. With no regional security alliances equivalent to NATO or the Warsaw Pact, the fear is real in Southeast Asia and Korea that disengagement by the Soviet Union and the United States could give rise the local big powers, China and Japan, seeking to establish their own regional hegemony.

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