Sino-Japan Strategic Rivalry and the Security of the Korean Peninsula

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Abstract

The Northeast Asian regional security complex has both consistent and inconsistent factors within the global security structure. While non-traditional security issues dominate academic discussions in the European region, traditional security concerns are still preponderant, both among policymakers and the general public in the Northeast Asian region. Sino-Japan rivalry centers on the discussions on Northeast Asian regional security. The expectation on the rivalry between China and Japan is one of the representative security concerns in the region, and to a certain degree it also stabilizes the Northeast Asian security order, even though this was not intended.

It is highly likely that an escalation will be avoided of military confrontation leading to a war-scale conflict between the two countries. Instead Japan will pass the buck for its military responsibility against the China threat to the hegemonic state, the United States, and China's military capability cannot catch up with that of the United States, at least until 2030. Also it is inappropriate to evaluate the two countries' military strategies as revisionist ones preparing for hegemonic status. Regarding its implications for the Korean peninsula, if Japan buck-passes its role of counter-balancing China to the United States, the latter will demand an alliance commitment from the ROK to a similar level of that of the U.S.-Japan alliance.
Introduction

In the era of post-Cold War international relations, Northeast Asia has emerged as one of the core global security concerns. With the end of the U.S.-Soviet confrontation, scholars with perspectives rooted in Western tradition diagnosed the region, concluding that under-development of regional institutionalization, absence of visionary leadership and aggravation of structural differences among regional states complicates the establishment of peaceful inter-state relations.\(^1\) With the slow pace of structural change in Northeast Asian international relations, post-Cold War concerns have remained largely unresolved. Despite different standards and subjects of analysis, probable consequences of the rise of China, Japan’s military build-up, instability on the Korean peninsula and across the Taiwan Strait validate such pessimist views.

There are two significant deficiencies observed in the almost two decades of post-Cold War studies on Northeast Asian international relations. Firstly, analyses on the shifts in the regional power structure have largely remained only at the predictive level.\(^2\) Careful assessments based on objective analyses and an explanation of empirical evidence is needed at this point. Secondly, the global level of analysis is directly applied to the analysis of Northeast Asia without any filtering apparatus.\(^3\) Such generalization is acceptable, given that consistent

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similarities and differences tend to coexist between global and regional politics. In the case of Northeast Asia, the rise of China and the U.S.-China future scenarios are the core determinants of upcoming global and regional politics, so the direct application of a global level of analysis is somewhat justifiable. Nevertheless, sufficient discussions on the so-called “regional security complex” should be held consecutively. To overcome these problems it is necessary to analyze regional security issues, both on the Northeast Asian level and global level simultaneously. Discussions on Sino-Japan rivalry are very applicable in this context.

The purpose of this essay is to make an objective assessment of the strategic confrontation between China and Japan—in regional and global context—and to examine its implications for the security of the Korean peninsula. The essay consists of the following three parts: 1) Introduction to the major theories of international relations dealing with confrontation between the two rival states; 2) objectively verify the military capabilities of China and Japan, the status of their rivalry, and possibilities of future confrontation; and 3) based on the analysis, provide concrete future scenarios and explain the significance thereof to the security of the Korean peninsula.

Rivalry and Collision in Northeast Asia: Theory and Reality

The United States, despite being a non-regional actor, established its position as the most influential one, as its hegemonic role expanded into the region with the deepening regional Cold War alignment. The decline of U.S. influence with the end of the Cold War, therefore, was a significant determinant causing instability in Northeast Asia. Despite minor disagreements, security analysts forecast that China and Japan will competitively fill the power vacuum resulting from a relative decline of U.S. influence in the region. Prior to analysis of the Sino-Japan strategic rivalry, there need to be theoretical explanations on the

conditions of global politics, under which rivalry between two states develops into a physical collision. A number of important theoretical concepts, directly applicable to the subject of this paper, will first be examined.

First, considering the changing regional security environment, it is essential for a state to determine the size of national power and military capability required to secure its sovereignty under the assumption of international politics as anarchy. States generally consider the following two questions: What kind of power distribution is recognized as a safe order among state actors? What efforts should each state try to pursue to secure such order? To be more specific, the ultimate question is whether the power balance among multiple actors or maximizing a hegemon’s power attains the desirable international security order. Whether an individual state pursues balance of power or power maximization is a result of complex foreign policy calculations considering geopolitical particularities, its relations with the existing hegemon, the power distribution in international politics, and interpretation of its own power expansion opportunity. Such elements of consideration in Northeast Asia can be observed in the relationships among the United States, China and Japan and each state’s status in the region. The United States is a regional stabilizer with geographical distance. Its security alliance with Japan has been strengthened and transformed to suit the 21st century international security environment. Maritime territorial disputes continue to occur between China and Japan, needless to mention the historical and territorial disputes involving other actors. Considering the circumstantial evidence, the regional actors are more likely to find common interests in pursuing the balance of power approach.

Second, there are contending arguments on continuity and disparity between global and regional hegemonic influence. According to offensive realists, meaningful global hegemony cannot exist without clear superiority in nuclear capability. All hegemonic influence in theory, then, is limited to the regional level. Different analytical perspec-

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tives, in contrast, explain that in the contemporary world of globalization, development of information technology, and prevalence of institutionalization, influence of global and regional hegemony may not be distinctively defined.6 Such contemporary elements in international relations would sustain U.S. hegemony on a global level, and this U.S. status would make any pursuit of hegemony by China or Japan to remain regional in character. In the meantime, China and Japan, to maximize national interests, would continue to struggle in determining foreign policy direction between two contending predictions on whether states continue to pursue power expansion or restrain from taking further adventure after acquisition of a certain level of power.7

The third question is on the availability of regional or global mechanism that can restrain actors’ power expansion. Traditional theories explain that states’ balancing behavior or hegemonic war against the existing hegemon determines the status of a new power. In most historical cases, however, rising hegemons chose a power maximization strategy more frequently over a balance of power strategy. Germany, Italy, the former Soviet Union and Japan continued to pursue power maximization over self-restraint, while they were recognizing themselves as rising powers.8 In such courses of actions, there were both successes and failures of regional mechanism restraining states’ power expansion. Despite the two World Wars, Europe has successfully achieved regional institutionalization that restrains states’ power expansion, the phenomenon distinctively different from current East

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Asian international relations. However, in Northeast Asia, Japan has remained as the only highly industrialized nation. If China’s modernization project succeeds, China and Japan will remain as the only major regional confrontational states. The region characterized by such bipolar rivalry would not be entitled to any mechanism that can constrain power expansion of regional states. Considering structural, cultural, and historical factors that contribute to the underdevelopment of institutionalization, emergence of any embryonic institutional mechanism would still have many limits in effectively constraining Sino-Japan rivalry.9

Lastly, it is necessary to consider causal relations between the conditions that lead to war and the structure of international politics, assuming that there is a potential for an outbreak of war between China and Japan. The distribution of power is commonly categorized into unipolarity, bipolarity, stable multipolarity, and unstable multipolarity. The current distribution of power may be characterized by unstable unipolar-multipolarity with a slight difference in high and low politics. Unipolarity under the U.S. military superiority will continue in high politics, while unstable multipolarity among second-rank powers, such as Europe, China and Japan, will continue until approximately 2030. In response to any possible rise of China or Japan, counterbalancing forces among the states will effectively constrain each other against rising. However, in the current unstable unipolar-multipolar system, the United States, which possesses the military superiority, is likely to assume the role of balancing if rivalries resulting from power expansion resort to conflicts in high politics. In this context, the so-called “buck-passing theory” increasingly prevails among scholars in recent discussions.10 More subtle analysis is required as the major poli-


cy dilemma will rise in choosing between balancing and buck-passing. For instance, if China pursues a policy of becoming a regional hegemon, Japan will have to find a point of compromise between balancing against China with autonomous capability and buck-passing the role to the United States.

**China and Japan-Assessment of Military Capability and Power Projection**

**China’s Military Capability and Security Strategy**

The U.S.-China cooperative global leadership has been working effectively since 9/11 in 2001. Diplomatic relations with the United States were critical to China’s achievement of economic modernization. Various interpretations are possible.\(^{11}\) Those who understand aggressive U.S. foreign policy from the perspectives of conspiracy theory explain that a series of U.S. interventionary policies are ultimately aimed at successfully containing China before any future hegemonic confrontation.\(^ {12}\) On the other hand, those who explain the Bush administration’s unilateralism with the emphasis on the role of the neo-conservative group understand U.S. foreign policy as an outward manifestation of domestic ideology as a result of combined decision-making elements.\(^ {13}\) Nevertheless, both perspectives commonly find that China is cooperative to current U.S. unilateralism. With the United States, which has secured the hegemonic status at the center of the unilateral order, China tries to avoid diplomatic confrontation. China’s diplomatic prudence in determining its position to break Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty between the United States and Russia after 9/11 and

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\(^{11}\) Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?” pp. 6–11.


recognition of the U.S. War on Terrorism clearly demonstrates China’s efforts to gain U.S. support and maintain peaceful relations with neighboring states, until the goal of modernization is completed by maintaining the current phase of economic development.

For more detailed discussions, an objective assessment should be made of China’s military capability, based on a series of current events. To begin with, there was large-scale land and air joint military training on Dongshan Island (in Fujian province) in August 2004. It is generally known that the training is aimed at securing the command of the sea in the Taiwan Strait. The training attracted a great deal of attention for investing in the most advanced units and the latest weapons systems such as Russian SU-27 fighters, nuclear submarine attackers, and missile destroyers.\(^\text{14}\) In particular, the self-assessment in 2004 recognizes the effectiveness of long-range missile capabilities. Efforts to modernize the military to be well-prepared for modern warfare seem to be making some initial achievements. China’s military modernization has a rather long history; specific military strategies chosen by China are summarized in four directions: “downsizing military forces on a large scale,” “organizational reform,” “improved training,” and “modernization of equipment.”\(^\text{15}\) In the past 20 years, its military forces have been reduced by 45 percent (1,700,000). For the past 15 years, since 1989, annual military spending increased from 12 percent to 17 percent each year.\(^\text{16}\) Most of all, China tries to possess a navy capable of open-ocean operations and an air force equipped with the latest weapons. The 2004 White Paper on National Defense contains China’s first official position after the appointment of Hu Jintao as the Chairman of the Communist Party. The basic objectives of the White Paper are summarized as: protection of sovereignty, building comprehensive national power, establishment of national defense, cooperative development between the economy and military, military modernization, maintenance of social order and stability, and creating an acceptable international and sur-

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\(^{15}\) Keith Crane et al., *Modernizing China’s Military: Opportunities and Constraints* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2005).

\(^{16}\) Ibid., pp. 125–33.
rounding environment. Based on these discussions we may have two findings: First, the White Paper states a clear position on the Taiwan issue. Second, it clearly expresses China’s determination for military transformation. To catch up with the global military revolution, China conducts its own “military transformation” through informatization, joint operations, downsizing, and equipment-modernization, along with attainment of operational capabilities and new weapons. The major weapons capabilities to be secured include early-warning-alarm-networks, SLBM target capability, nuclear aircraft carriers, multi-purpose Aegis system, and improved MIRV Julang II.

China’s military strategy went through rather a long historical change, shifting from “people’s war” to “limited local-war strategy.” Not only does the strategy reflect adaptation to the changing international environment since the 1980s, it also reveals efforts to prepare for the possible outbreak of war by strengthening military operational capabilities both in ground and maritime border areas. The most important precondition for successful achievement of a “limited local-war strategy” is in strengthening rapid response forces with mobility and target capability; this essentially means modernization and enhancement of naval and air forces. However, development of China’s military-science technology is disproportionately large. Except for certain areas, it is assessed as not yet reaching global standards. A large-scale importation of high-tech weaponry and technology will be inevitable for a while. “Limited local-war strategy in the information age,” emphasized in the 2004 White Paper, requires infinite financial resources. Though China’s military industrial capability has certainly improved to a significant level along with the progress of economic growth and importation of weaponry from Russia is also consistently increasing, socio-political characteristics and excessive foreign dependence for economic growth would still limit the growth of military power.

What are the most outstanding characteristics and significant

19 Crane, et al., Modernizing China’s Military, ch. 8.
aspects in China’s strengthening military capabilities outlined above? The heart of the matter is whether China is seeking militarization, and if so, whether a security threat initiated by China’s militarization is emerging in Northeast Asia. Giving the focus of analysis to preparation for “strategic war with Japan,” the rise of China’s naval power is gaining significant attention. Under the goal of revival to become an open-ocean naval force by 2050, it will carry out plans to obtain nuclear SLBM with projection capabilities, Aegis destroyers, and aircraft carriers. By 2004, China had already acquired 24 ICBM DF-5s, with which attacks on the U.S. mainland became possible. It is also known to have achieved a partial acquisition of DF-31 and SLBM purpose Julang II, but has not yet reached the level of practicality.  

Considering the numerous developments, there is no doubt that China’s military modernization efforts have expanded significantly since the 1990s. Despite certain achievements, its macro-level national development strategy, budget limits, the limit of military technology, and burden of economic growth would not allow China to easily overcome its inferiority to the United States in both nuclear and conventional war capabilities for at least another 30 years. Future military capability, largely characterized by the so-called 4th generation concept of war, requires elements from various spheres, such as the quality of individual soldiers, establishment of a comprehensive system throughout all social sectors, possession of technology, masterful ability to manage weapons, and long-range missile projection capability. Narrowing its gap with the U.S. military power seems to be extremely difficult. In particular, China’s economic growth has not yet secured self-sustainability. Numerous elements such as excessive dependence on Western investment capital, supply of energy and other major raw materials, deepening inequality in wealth, and the need for stable growth in global capitalism, could become major obstacles. These hindrances would eventually make a revisionist military build-up strategy impracticable.

Japan’s Military Power and Security Strategy

The U.S.-Japan security alliance is the most significant determinant of Japan’s military and security strategy. “Asymmetrical structure based on the San Francisco system” characterizes the U.S.-centered security structure known as the “hub and spoke” system. The system that centers on the U.S.-Japan bilateral security alliance has been preserved since the early-Cold War period and has been effectively maintained and transformed during the post-Cold War period. With the distinctive identity of the alliance mutually shared and recognized, new objectives were established by adapting to the changes in the international security environment. In particular, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the alliance functions as an institutional mechanism through which Japan gradually expands its role in international security. As the United States needs allies in major regions in order to efficiently control international security order against terrorism, Japan is being able to faithfully fulfill such a role. Assessments of Japan’s military and security strategy can be enhanced through a proper understanding of the role of the alliance.

Objective analysis of Japan’s military capability will rely on two recently published materials: the National Defense Program Guideline (NDPG) published in December 2004 and the Mid-Term Defense Program (MTDP, FY 2005-2009). Drafted by the Japan Defense Agency and finalized through discussions and adjustments between the administration and the ruling party, the two documents can be regarded as the best materials for examining the direction of Japan’s military policy and development. The New Defense Program Guideline was first established in 1976 and then amended in 1995, with the recent announcement thus being the second amendment. The Mid-Term Defense Program has been amended every five years since the first announcement in 1985. Therefore, the fifth Mid-Term Defense Program is an important guideline for determining Japan’s military direction until 2010. The amendments encompass affirmation of the changing international security environment, redefined national interests in the military-security arena, a flexible concept of defense capability, and acquiring military capabilities that can respond to various security threats.22

The most significant elements of the NDPG can be summarized by
the following three points: First, Japan is attempting a new approach to Northeast Asian regional security. The understanding of the security environment surrounding Japan is clearly revealed, as it addresses China and North Korea as major destabilizing factors and provides response strategies to North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons and incidents of territorial sea invasion by China. Second, Japan states its intention to pursue appropriate policies within the three frameworks: self-efforts, Japan-U.S. security arrangements, and cooperation with the international community. It is implied that Japan will gradually expand its security role in the global community, while maintaining the existing U.S.-Japan security arrangement. Third, on more specific improvements of its defense force, an emphasis is placed on effective joint operations of the Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) and the Maritime Self-Defense Force, strengthening mobile operations, and development of science and technology. Japan has also announced specific management plans for the development of science and technology, incorporating the progress in science and technology into its defense force, the acquisition of the Aegis system (Aegis-Equipped Destroyers), an embarkation escort ship carrier, establishment of instrumental and special operations units, and a ballistic missile defense system.

The new Mid-Term Defense Program is significantly differentiated from those of the past, for prioritizing national defense capabilities against ballistic missile attacks, and attacks by guerillas or special operations units. In more specific terms, while reducing the scale of forces and the weapons systems, it aims to improve the capability level, which is witnessed in development and acquisition of combat helicopters (AH-64D), three Aegis destroyers, Patriot surface-to-air missiles, and air tanker-transport aircraft.24

The new directions revealed in the NDPG and the MTDP in fact can give the impression to neighboring Northeast Asian states that Japan is crossing over the line of the “self-defense” concept. After the release of these two documents, China and North Korea—through

various channels—repeatedly emphasized their position that Japan’s security policy direction should not disrupt peace and stability in Northeast Asia. A dispassionate analysis is required of whether Japan’s direction with its new defense system and military policy would result in militarization and thus catalyze competition with China and disrupt Northeast Asian security. Although varying according to researchers’ interests and subjects of analysis, “militarization” refers to securing military capability to a level of absolute superiority compared to neighboring states, or pursuing a military policy that can be seen as a threat to neighbors rather than a pursuit of defense. Based on the concept, it is yet too early to decide by examining the current development where Japan is pursuing militarization.

There is consensus among experts on the evaluation that Japan’s military capability has reached a significant level. Its air and maritime self-defense forces are known to be superior to those of Korea. The maritime self-defense force, i.e. Japan’s naval power, is understood to be superior to that of China. However, such one-sided assessments should not be directly led to predicting that Japan desires to pursue hegemony in Northeast Asia. Most significantly, in terms of missile capabilities, Japan has not overcome its inferior status to China. Japan currently cannot catch up with China’s Second Artillery Force capabilities that include the deployment of ICBMs and SLBMs. The capability of the self-defense force is expected to improve by a considerable degree; however, it can be assessed as still being compliant with the overall East Asian order.

Generally, concerning Japan’s normalization strategy, the assessment on the likelihood of Japan’s pursuit of hegemony in Northeast Asia is often made based on its past militarism. In fact, the function of the U.S.-Japan alliance should first be appropriately analyzed. In the past, concerning the birth of Japanese militarism, lack of a restraining mechanism both on a regional and global level was seen as a major

problem. Currently however, the firm foundation of the U.S.-Japan alliance plays two significant roles. First, the future U.S.-Japan bilateral alliance does not only contribute to regional security, but it is also an institutional mechanism in which Japan contributes to global security. At the same time, the alliance plays an important role as an adequate mechanism restraining Japan’s militarization and thus sustaining the regional security order.26 From the American perspective, the alliance is a strategy to maintain the status-quo, a strategic choice to secure U.S. interests in Northeast Asia, and the best means to prevent a rebirth of Japan’s conservative militarism. Against this background, Japan’s military-security policy is to prioritize the U.S.-Japan alliance and to seek multilateralism and various diplomatic measures.27 The current Bush administration’s diplomatic relations with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is considerable enough to be compared with the Ron-Yasu friendship of the Reagan administration. The administration considers the alliance as the key lever in its Northeast Asia security policy designs. Unless strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance undermines its diplomatic relations with China, the effective management of the rise of China by strengthening the alliance is an essential interest to the United States.

Sino-Japan Confrontation and its Implications for the Security of the Korean Peninsula

Future Scenarios of Sino-Japan Competition

An analysis of the prospects for Sino-Japanese competition requires a detailed study of the possibility of military conflict. First, China’s new naval strategy increases the possibility of conflict between the two states. Having shifted its strategic goal from “coastal defense” to “offshore defense” since the late 1980s, China places its emphasis on


defense of a sea area ranging from Vladivostok to the Malacca Strait and to the First Islands Chain defense line to the east. While actively securing 200 sea-miles Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) under the UN Law of Sea Convention of 1982, it aims to secure maritime routes for the transportation of strategic materials—in particular, ensuring stable oil flow from the Middle East, which is an essential precondition for China’s economic development. The change of the military focus to offshore defense necessitates the enhancement of naval projection capabilities and procurement of military high technology. China aims to build a naval force which can conduct operations in the Second Islands Chain defense line by 2050.28

Second, Japan uses strengthening of naval force as a useful means of diplomacy. Since the Reagan-Nakasone diplomatic ties in 1983, “1000 nautical mile sea-lane defense” became the official policy of Japan. For realization of the policy, Japan has continued to strengthen its maritime self-defense force. Japan identifies participation in the activities of key international organizations such as the UN, APEC, or ARF as a major means of promoting national interests.29 Considering the geopolitical particularities which can bring about conflicts with China over territories such as the Senkaku Islands, Japan’s diplomatic naval strategy is seen as a major source of tension in the region.

Based on the reviewed concepts of international relations and military strategies of China and Japan, scenarios of the future Northeast Asian power structure can be constructed. The scenarios are based on two important assumptions. First, this paper does not envision a possible emergence of civil society in China nor a transition to a democratic regime. Second, the United States will remain as a global hegemonic power and continue to engage in Northeast Asian affairs in pursuit of its national interests. The two assumptions are significant variables that can alter the future scenarios. For instance, if democratization of China progresses, a regional order with a kind of mini-NATO system can be

expected to emerge. On the other hand if the United States loses its global influence as a result of unexpected events, a reorganization of the East Asian order will rapidly progress, centering on either China or Japan.

Future scenarios based on the structure of Sino-Japan confrontation are summarized in terms of four possibilities: traditional balance of power, military confrontation over particular areas, a peaceful coexistence with mutual military transparency, and Japan’s complete security dependence to the United States. A comparison of the scenarios is presented in the following table:

Table 1. Four Future Scenarios of Sino-Japan Future Confrontation

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<tr>
<td>Increased Military Capability</td>
<td>Maintenance at a certain level</td>
<td>Continuous military competition</td>
<td>Possible emergence of multilateralism in security dimension</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socio-economic relations</td>
<td>Separation between politics and economics, maintain incentives for economic growth/interdependence</td>
<td>Periodic cycles in the scale of trade in Asian (economic)</td>
<td>Accelerated economic integration as the center of East growth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relations with neighbors (Koreas)</td>
<td>Efforts to locate the Korean peninsula in one’s sphere of influence</td>
<td>Korea and Taiwan as possible clashing points of Sino-Japan collision</td>
<td>Regional community, cooperative efforts to peaceful settlement on the Korean peninsula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations with the hegemonic state (U.S.)</td>
<td>U.S. recognizes its role as a balancer</td>
<td>Decrease in U.S. influence, U.S.-Japan alliance is significantly limited</td>
<td>Modified form of cooperative regime among powers centering on the U.S.</td>
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<td>Anti-American coalition attempts by China</td>
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The most likely scenario of the future development of Sino-Japan relations until 2030 is located somewhere between scenarios one and four. Scenario two is unlikely to be realized, due to the desperate need for China’s continued economic growth, constraints on Japanese military build-up under the U.S.-Japan alliance, and division of labor that takes place between the economies of China and Japan. The possibility of scenario three is also low, given the continued need for the maintenance of China’s socialist political structure. With the geopolitical particularities of Northeast Asia characterized by closely bordered states and fundamental differences in the perspectives on issues of North Korea and Taiwan, the possibilities of realization are not that high.

Essentially, a future Sino-Japan strategic confrontation would result in mutual militarization but not to the degree that would resort to war. For belligerent states to choose an extreme diplomatic means like war, many additional conditions should be further supplemented. War is a choice based on the consideration of not only the change of military power but also aggressiveness of leadership, geopolitical characteristics, available diplomatic means alternative to war, and international restraining mechanisms. Against this background, Sino-Japan strategic confrontation is not likely to lead to a military conflict, at least until 2030 when China’s industrialization is expected to reach a new level. The following are more specific grounds for predicting the likelihood of scenarios one and four:

First, the U.S.-Japan alliance restrains the possibility of a Sino-Japanese war. Although China clarifies its position against a foreign military presence in East Asia, it reveals a discriminatory position toward the U.S.-Japan alliance. The basic function of the alliance is maintenance of the status-quo power structure. There is an expectation that the presence of the United States will adequately restrain Japan’s military build-up. Japan may conduct a “buck-passed hegemonic war” against China on behalf of the United States; however, it is not in the interests of the United States to allow Japan to become an independent

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military power. Although, within the framework of the U.S.-Japan alliance, Japan shares a role in balancing China, the major confrontational structure would remain in the U.S.-China axis. From the perspectives of Japan, neither peaceful nor deteriorating U.S.-China relations are desirable, for in the former situation, Japan’s strategic value would drop, and in the latter case, it would have to accept a buck-passed war. In this background, Japan prefers to maintain the current U.S.-Japan alliance system with a degree of autonomy.

Second, according to buck-passing, when the buck-passed state (the United States) and the potential hegemonic state (China) are located geographically far apart, especially, when there is an ocean between the two states, policies of buck-passing prevail over power-balancing. If on a global level, the United States remains as the only hegemonic state, while second-rank non-military powers can maintain a stable multipolar system, Japan will be attracted to buck-passing its role of balancing China’s military build-up to the international community, especially the United States, rather than confronting it. If the cooperative international structure among second-rank countries such as Japan, China, the EU and Russia is maintained with even a minimum degree of norm, Japan will try to avoid a direct confrontation with China. In the 1930s, Britain and France buck-passed to Russia their role of balancing the rising Germany. It was a failed policy that resulted from miscalculations of the proximity of the Russia-Germany border, Russia’s capability to balance Germany, and Germany’s national power that led to a catastrophic war. However, in Northeast Asia the United States will continue to play a role as a regional balancer without facing any military challenge for another two or three decades.

Third, according to various researches, leadership is an important variable in making decisions to go to war. Among the past U.S.-Japan military competition phases, only the one in 1934–1941 led to a war; and that was because the Japanese leadership had a militaristic inclination. Currently, China and Japan both outwardly voice the impor-
tance of Northeast Asian peace and stability and their efforts in their military-security policies toward the cause. Evidence in the 2004 White Paper, the first official document since the appointment of Hu Jintao, Japan’s recent National Defense Guideline, and the Mid-Term Defense Program do not adequately prove that the two states are taking military preparatory steps to ultimately become Northeast Asian hegemonic states. There are possibilities for the rise of acute conflicts in pursuit of their goals in contribution to global peace through regional stability, realization of sovereignty in surrounding islands, and securing comprehensive national interests against new security threats. Conclusively, direct confrontations among the states and the trilateral power structure managed by the United States will coexist in complexity.

Fourth, in statistical figures, Sino-Japan trade amounted to only US$1 billion in 1972, but reached US$73 billion in 2003. Japan is China’s biggest trade partner. China has also become the second largest trade partner of Japan. Furthermore, a Korea-China-Japan Free Trade Agreement is actively being discussed. Such gradual formation of a regional community dilutes the possibility of a Sino-Japanese military confrontation. Conversely, even prior to the Sino-Japanese war and the Pacific war, China-Japan and U.S.-Japan trade volumes had reached a significant level. Although arguments on economic interdependence vary, even opposing realists recognize the importance of economic interdependence and its impact on institutionalization of relations as an alternative to avoiding military confrontation.

Implications for the Security of the Korean Peninsula

Korea’s national security interest is based on: 1) finding a permanent resolution to North-South confrontational structure and to further progress toward unification; 2) equipping itself with sufficient national power to deter neighboring states from having territorial ambitions over the peninsula, and accordingly: 3) establishing a regional security
structure to promote cooperation, peace, and prosperity among North-

east Asian states.35

Although generally speaking, unstable North-South relations are
the primary source of insecurity on the Korean peninsula, the vital pre-
requisite for a peace settlement in Korea is the stable management of
relations among the surrounding powers. The U.S.-China cooperation
since September 2001 and the effectively functioning U.S.-Japan
alliance imply that now is the optimal time to end the North-South
confrontational structure. The regional and global circumstances pro-
vide that it is an optimal time for settling peace on the Korean peninsu-
la. Although U.S. preoccupation with constructing a post-modern
international order by conducting a war on terrorism can present
obstacles to peaceful relations among regional actors, there are minimal
prospects for a China-led anti-American coalition. China has adopted
its modernization project as a national priority, which requires a friend-
ly diplomatic relations with the United States. Meanwhile, Japan is still
burdened in having an independent voice against the United States
and China. More explicitly, it is desirable to end the North-South con-
frontational structure in the next 10 years.

Future scenarios of the two states’ relations, in between the direct
balance of power and buck-passing, will have significant implications
for the security of the Korean peninsula. Under the balance of power
scenario, Korea will engage in a diplomatic war in efforts to avoid
being under the power monopoly of one state. If Japan buck-passes to
the United States its role of counter-balancing China, the United States
will demand an alliance commitment from the ROK to a similar level
of the U.S.-Japan alliance. As a result, the Korean government will face
diplomatic difficulties between China and the U.S.-Japan alliance. In
particular, buck-passing, from the perspectives of the United States and
Japan, is a choice that has the strongest tendency for maintaining the
status-quo. This implies that there is a strong tendency for the states to
maintain the status quo of the divided Korean peninsula, which sus-
tains the existing Northeast Asian regional security order.

Both China and Japan share a certain degree of national interests

35 Park Ihn Hwi (in Korean), “Northeast Asian International Relations and Korea’s
regarding their Korean peninsula policy. Firstly, from the Japanese perspective, they would like to continue the current Northeast Asian regional power balance, initiated by the United States, which has given a relatively favorable position to Japan on the Korean peninsula. Within the security framework of bilateral alliance between the United States and Japan, the Japanese government understands the Korea-U.S. alliance and similarity of those three countries—Korea, the United States and Japan—political and economic values will continuously secure Japan’s interest on the Korean peninsula. Secondly, from the Chinese perspective, as repeatedly mentioned in this paper, the primary goal of China’s national interest in the Northeast Asian region is the political and diplomatic stability of the region, which is the most critical foundation for China’s further economic development and social modernization. In that sense China’s government understands that the Korean peninsula’s problem center on the political and diplomatic stability of the Northeast Asian region.

Korea, as a relatively small state, should continuously persuade neighboring powers that stability on the Korean peninsula is the precondition for peace in Northeast Asia. It is often emphasized that Korea needs a national strategy of “utilizing foreign powers;” however, most of the time, small nations have extremely limited choices. Since the emergence of the modern era at the end of the 19th Century, Korea has not existed as a meaningful state with substantial diplomatic leverage over its neighbors either on regional or global levels due to geopolitical obstacles. In the next Northeast Asian power structure, there is no guarantee that the past difficulties will not be repeated; in particular, Sino-Japanese strategic rivalry can bring about unexpected security crises. In this context, the following policies can be considered as important national security strategies:

First, regional security institutionalization among Northeast Asian states should be visualized. From the realist perspectives, China’s socialist identity—conflicting with Western political thought—can contribute to a security dilemma. The regional security dialogue must be established through effective management of networks and open communication channels. Many scholars of international politics explain that the current Six-Party Talks on North Korean nuclear problem is a good starting point in this regard. Having understood the desirability
to maintain the momentum of the Six-Party talks in reality is an extremely difficult task. Setting the involvement of the United States as a precondition, regional states must set good agendas of cooperation and common national interests—i.e. prevention of an arms race, economic development, macroeconomic policy, environment, education, labor movement and cultural exchanges.

Second, to maintain confidence in the U.S.-ROK alliance, visible efforts must be strengthened. If apprehension on the needs of U.S.-ROK alliance continuously rises, the probability of the United States giving up the alliance is heightened. In fact, the security anxiety resulting from the relocation of the U.S. army bases in Korea is not purely a military one, but rather originates from domestic political disputes surrounding the issue. The presence of the U.S. army on the Korean peninsula is significant in itself; however, there is no guarantee on further deployment of troops in case of military conflict. The U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Agreement only provides for an increase of personnel under Congressional approval or by the authority of the President. There is no automatic involvement clause. Therefore, if there is no firm determination by the U.S. administration to defend Korea, the initial response of the United States would be limited. Recovering trust among alliance states does not necessitate a huge expense or political costs. Continuous efforts to reproduce mutual benefits based on correct understanding of the partner’s values, interests, and institutions are essential for effective management of the alliance.

Third, in parallel with the U.S.-ROK alliance, Korea has to establish an autonomous national military defense. The U.S. Armed Forces in Korea will make a significant reduction of personnel, to 12,500, by 2008. In order to make up for the reduced military force, Korea will need qualitative supplementation. For the time being, Korea should thus make parallel efforts to establish a self-reliant defense potential and efforts to strengthen the U.S. forces. “Cooperative self-reliant defense” is a concept that utilizes cooperative relations as a major tool and is thus contrary to and distinguished from exclusive self-reliant defense. To realize a successful self-reliant defense, effective management of the alliance by creating mutual dependence is the key, as well as the state’s own military capability. The objective of self-reliant defense is to develop mutually-dependent U.S.-ROK alliance relations based on the
autonomous defense capability, which is expected to be established within the next 10 years. The U.S. military’s US$11 billion investment plan should be implemented as soon as possible. To bring forward the timetable of achieving the self-reliant defense, it needs to enhance high-tech military capability by acquiring information war capability, early warning systems, automatic scout/reconnaissance aircraft, and the Aegis system, which are all currently largely reliant upon the U.S. military.

**Conclusion**

China and Japan are unlikely to choose such a costly option as military conflict until 2030, when China’s modernization project comes to the end of the first stage and the U.S.-Japan New Guidelines for Defense Cooperation spirit would have continued in response. Nonetheless, China and Japan will continue to build up their military power for the sake of their respective national interests, and their regional power struggle will take place by means of a combination of policies based on the traditional balance of power concept, combined with Japan’s policy based on the “buck-passing theory.” Regarding the Korean peninsula, it is highly probable that the United States, China and Japan will adhere to policies of maintaining the status-quo of the North-South division. If the North Korean nuclear problem is not resolved smoothly, such a probability will increase.

To remain as a meaningful actor in Northeast Asia is not an easy task. The Korean peninsula is a place of strategic importance, where territorial and marine forces collide and Western and non-Western civilizations border one another. Thus, there should be consistent emphases on the fact that, without peace and prosperity in this area, Northeast Asian regional security cannot be guaranteed. After the end

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of the Second World War, it was understood that Northeast Asian international relations would be a complex security structure that depends on competing elements: The role of the United States as a balancer, the possibility of a hegemonic war on the China-U.S. axis, the U.S.-Japan alliance overcoming cultural differences, and finding resolutions to the problems of the Korean peninsula and the Taiwan Strait. The course of history has a definite meaning. Any changes in the power balance among the surrounding states need much continuous attention.