

## U.S. Grand Strategy In East Asia

ZNET, February

It doesn't have any oil. Its economy has practically bottomed out. The population is a mere 22 million, a significant portion of whom are malnourished. Why on earth is the United States so fixated on regime change in North Korea? The answer lies in Washington's grand strategy toward East Asia, which in turn can only be understood against the backdrop of the region's recent history.

Before the United States ever entered the picture, East Asia was a Sinocentric universe. Chinese language, culture, and Confucianism heavily influenced Japan and Korea; in the Chinese tributary system, subject countries paid deference to the Chinese emperor. This regional dominance ended in the mid-19th century, when China was defeated in the Opium Wars and subjected to the humiliation of territorial division and economic subjugation.

In part to avoid China's fate, Japan took a different tactic after being pried open by Admiral Perry's "black ships" in 1853. By absorbing Western technology but preserving Japanese culture - "Western machines, Eastern thought" as the phrase went - Japan built up its economic and military power until, in 1905, it shocked the world by defeating a Western colonial power, Russia.

And what of Korea, the third principle country in East Asia? Although the country maintained a unified, independent existence for over a thousand years, its position as a small peninsula jutting out of China in the direction of Japan - a "shrimp between two whales" as the Koreans put it - made it vulnerable to invasion from all sides. It often relied on Chinese back-up to keep the Japanese at arm's length.

By the late 19th century, with China humbled and Japan ascendant, Korea could not prevent itself from falling into the latter's orbit. In the same treaty that ended the 1905 Russo-Japanese War, for which negotiator Teddy Roosevelt won a most ignoble Nobel

Prize, the Philippines came under U.S. control and Korea was ceded to the Japanese. Korea would remain a Japanese colony until the end of World War II.

Having defeated Japan, the United States became the dominant regional power in East Asia in the Cold War era, billing itself as guarantor of stability through its mutual defense treaties with South Korea and Japan. Toward that end, it has maintained 100,000 troops in the region supported by a massive array of weaponry.

The division of the region, represented so painfully by the division of the Korean peninsula, has suited U.S. military and economic objectives. The Communist "threat" not only justified U.S. military presence, but served as a useful stick for Japan and South Korea to repress unions and dissident parties. Japan played an important role in this hardening of positions, though its military was limited to defensive operations by its peace constitution.

During the Korean War, Japan enjoyed an economic windfall by serving as a staging area for U.S. troops. It subsequently followed the U.S. lead on Korean relations, which meant helping the South Korean economy and largely remaining aloof from North Korea.

Washington assumed that China and North Korea were indeed as "close as lips and teeth" as the two countries liked to say. This was not, however, correct. First of all, Pyongyang skillfully played Beijing and Moscow off one another to get the best economic and political deals. Second, North Korea patterned its entire philosophy of self-sufficiency - *juche* - as a repudiation of what it termed the "flunkeyism" of Korea's previous position in the Chinese tributary system. Third, China's embrace of market reforms after 1979 raised not a few eyebrows among the North Korean leadership, not because the latter was rigidly opposed to economic experimentation but rather because it thought Beijing naïve about the political ramifications of the reforms.

The end of the Cold War in Europe scrambled the geopolitical playing field in Asia. The Soviet Union removed its nuclear umbrella from North Korea, which pushed Pyongyang toward developing its own deterrent. China became even less of a dependable friend to its erstwhile communist neighbor. Japan began to break free of its peace constitution. South Korea established diplomatic relations with China and Russia, while North Korea was not able to secure a comparable deal with Japan and the United States. During the 1990s, despite serious attempts to become engaged in the new global order, North Korea became progressively more isolated.

From Bush Sr. to Bush Jr., successive U.S. administrations have expected the North Korean regime to collapse and have devised various strategies to accelerate that process. At the same time, there are many reasons why the end of North Korea upsets U.S. geopolitical calculations. For one thing, with communism no longer a convenient bogeyman, the North Korean "threat" serves as a very useful justification for maintaining U.S. military presence in East Asia. North Korea's missiles, even though they can't reach the United States, have made missile defense more politically feasible in Washington.

Judging from its various national security documents, the Bush administration certainly considers China the more long-range threat.

But given U.S. corporate ties to China and Beijing's willingness to join the war on terrorism, it has been more politically expedient to elevate the North Korean threat. Were North Korea suddenly to disappear, the Pentagon would have to play up the threat of terrorism in the region or risk a clash with the Commerce Department and key figures like George Bush Sr. and Henry Kissinger by raising the profile of the China "threat."

The underlying challenge for the United States has been to ensure, if not a divided Korea, then at least one that is aligned with Washington. But what would happen if anti-American sentiment in South Korea (which is, more accurately, anti-Bush administration sentiment) combines with more deeply engrained anti-American sentiment in the North? Korean nationalism is a potent force, and many South Koreans have been secretly pleased at North Korea's missile launches and nuclear program for these don't pose a threat to the South and are, ultimately, Korean missiles and nukes.

Such nationalism may militate against the Pentagon having any important foothold on a unified peninsula. Coupled with growing resentment against U.S. troops in Japan, particularly Okinawa, the Pentagon may find itself without a port to call home in East Asia.

An independent, reunified, and neutral Korea is worrisome for the Pentagon. But a reassertion of an older order is even more troubling for Washington. With Japan rearming itself and China becoming an economic and military superpower, Korea will find itself back in the 19th century. It may, in other words, align itself with its powerful neighbor rather than the distant United States. A Korea that finds itself once again in China's orbit is not so farfetched. China just recently replaced the United States as South Korea's largest export market.

South Korean companies in China account for a startling 2 percent of China's exports. Korea would never become, like Hong Kong, a part of China, but an alliance would nevertheless tilt the most economically vibrant region of the world away from the United States.

Or consider another scenario. It is now possible to take a train from London to Vladivostok. The two Koreas are rebuilding their long-severed train link. Once the Korean train system has been reunified, a traveler can get on in London and get off at the very tip of South Korea, in Busan. Japan is considering an underwater link, which would extend this Eurasian connection even further. More important than tourism, the train link will significantly cut the cost and time of shipping freight between Europe and Asia. With Russia playing a revived role as bridge between East and West, the United States would be largely cut out of the economic picture.

For economic and military reasons, then, the United States has seen the need to control the future of the Korean peninsula. The Bush administration wants regime change in

North Korea, but not just any regime change. It wants to secure its foothold in East Asia. It would like to play the role the liberator in North Korea. The model here is not exactly Iraq, since liberator has segued rather too precipitously into occupier.

The more accurate comparison would be to Eastern Europe. Poland, Romania, and other Eastern European countries have become much more reliable allies than the "old Europe" of France and Germany. Without Eastern European enthusiasm, NATO would have dried up and disappeared. The Bush administration would love to turn North Korea into the Romania of Asia - a country to be relied on in the containment of China, a country more dependable than the unpredictable South Korea, a country more grateful in the long run than Japan.

It doesn't have oil or attractive real estate, and it doesn't represent a large enough consumer market to interest U.S. corporations. But North Korea has something else. It is the imagined pivot for a newly conceived U.S. military and economic presence in East Asia that, to paraphrase the old saw about NATO, keeps us in, China out, and Korea down.