

**Prospect for Change of Strategic Environment  
and Future of U.S. Force Presence in East Asia**

by  
**Woosang Kim**

**Department of Political Science and Diplomacy  
Yonsei University  
Seoul, Korea  
[kws@yonsei.ac.kr](mailto:kws@yonsei.ac.kr)**

**Prepared to present at the conference on "Maritime Security in Southeast and Southwest Asia," December 11-13, 2001, Tokyo, Japan.**

The Korean peninsula and the Taiwan Straits are often cited as two potentially explosive areas in East Asia. The two areas have a lot in common. First of all, they portray confrontations between different systems - capitalist versus communist and democratic versus authoritarian. Second, these are the very places where American and Chinese strategic interests collide with each other. For example, the Korean peninsula has been the historical demarcation between maritime and continental powers. Third, both in the Korean peninsula and the Taiwan Straits, status quo seems to be the only option to satisfy all the relevant countries including the U.S, Japan and Russia.

Scholars like William Wohlforth or Zbigniew Brzezinski have said that the current international system is the U.S. hegemonic stability system or Pax Americana and this system will last very long. On the other hand, scholars like Samuel Huntington have argued that the current system is the U.S. led unimultipolar system and that order will last only 10 to 20 years and will change to multipolarity. Many have thought that the U.S. was the hegemonic power in the system and the U.S. foreign policies were rather unilaterally decided or carried out. But, since the 9.11 terrorist attack on New York, the U.S. alone cannot easily tackle the main issues of the day. In solving problems related to terrorism, drug trafficking, money laundering, and other transnational crime, weapons of mass destruction, humanitarian assistance, refugee issues, environmental problems, and so forth. The U.S. needs other great powers and regional major powers' support. We knew that comprehensive security and human security issues were going to be important. But, since the 9.11 terrorist's attack and the war against terrorism, those issues drastically became the most important ones.

In this paper, I speculate a short-term and a long-term strategic environment in East Asia. I come up with several scenarios for the future regional security structure. I also discuss future of the U.S. force presence in East Asia.

### **Determinants of the Future East Asian Security Environment**

The future course of China and the U.S. response seem to be the main determinants in molding the future East Asian security. The current picture shows a stable superiority of Washington. However, velocity and magnitude of Chinese economic and military growth may end in different situations. In

addition, there do exist three potential sources of systemic change: erosion of U.S.-Japan alliance, active participation by Russia and unification of Korea.

### **China and the United States**

Can China manage to maintain rapid growth rates for two to three decades and eventually catch up with the United States? A number of studies suggest that China may likely become the economic superpower and overtake the United States position. According to *the Economist*, for example, China's economic size in the year 2020 to 2040 will be about 40% larger than that of the United States. Including such factors as "long-range military power, efficient foreign policy machinery, public support for vigorous foreign policy, and material interests abroad," China is the only potential power that can challenge the United States in the system.<sup>1</sup>

However, this view of China as a potential regional hegemon is not universally held. Others suggest that China's power is in fact still quite weak and is likely to remain so for many years to come. Among others, potential leadership struggle, the increasing gap between economic development in the hinterland and the coastal areas may work against China's success story.<sup>2</sup>

When considering the "China factor," however, we should always keep in mind that perception and misperception really matters. That is, how the United States and China perceive their relative national powers is probably more important than their actual relative national capabilities.<sup>3</sup>

The "America factor" has something to do with the U. S. national interests and strategies. Two types of United States foreign policy can be identified: a policy of internationalism and a policy of isolationism. Historically, the United States has pursued one or the other of these broad policies. Since the United States became the leading power in the postwar international system, however, it has pursued a policy of internationalism. The question is, now that the unifying Soviet threat is gone and domestic pressure for withdrawal increasing, how long the United States will maintain this policy of active engagement in East Asia, forward deployment of forces, and military alliances with the regional powers.<sup>4</sup>

China's level of dissatisfaction with the international and regional security order is another important factor that will influence regional stability. Even if the "one China" principle has been honored by most of the countries in the world, China is not satisfied with recent changes of the relationships

between Taiwan and other major powers in the region. China is particularly unhappy with the United States' explicit support for Taiwan.

The United States' strengthening of its ties with Japan, and its overt remarks about forward presence of forces in Korea and Japan after the Korean reunification also help contribute to China's dissatisfaction and angst. U.S. leadership and its active engagement in the region can be considered one of the most important factors contributing to China's dissatisfaction with the regional security environment. As long as China maintains the current form of regime based on communist ideology, it will remain as the potential challenger to the United States-led "uni-multipolar" systemic order.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the China factor and the America factor constitute the core variables around which the scenarios of the future regional security order below are constructed, and the dissatisfaction factor explains the likelihood and intensity of great power conflict in the region.

### **The United States-Japan Alliance**

The U.S.-Japan alliance has been the primary factor contributing economic prosperity and political stability in the region. If current trends continue, Japan will become the "normal state" sooner or later, and its economic and political role will be expanded in the region. However, Japan's security role will be restrained within the current framework of the U.S.-Japan alliance structure. That is, Japan's future role on regional security issues will be dependent on United States security policy toward the region. In the short term, no dramatic change in the bilateral alliance is likely to take place.

In the long term, however, if a significant change of this partnership in the future occurs, the region's security setting would be drastically shaken. The alliance has been a major tool for blocking China's rise as a regional hegemon and also for checking Japan's revival as a regional destabilizer. U.S. military presence in Japan is even referred as "bottle cap" or as an "egg shell." Therefore, an erosion of the alliance would be detrimental to the security of the region and also become the cause of changes in distribution of regional power.

### **Russia**

Russia's future influence depends on its growth and stabilization of politico-economic situation. No matter how successful its processes of economic modernization and political stabilization, however, Russia's potential influence

on East Asian regional security issues may not substantially increase in any time soon. Even if Russia starts to recover, it won't be easy for Russia to devote the necessary resources to the Far East to become an influential actor as China or the United States on East Asian security order in the near future.

### **Unification of Korea**

Unification of Korea will cast another source of change. The Korean peninsula is one place where the U.S.-China rivalry is clearly visible. The current situation is the embryonic stage in which the U.S. and China compete for influence over North Korea.

It is notable that historically Korea has tended to align with continental power, namely China. The only exception was the past fifty years when South Korea aligned with maritime power, the United States. If we put domestic variables such as anti-American sentiment and historical distrust toward Japan into consideration, there remains no guarantee that a unified Korea will remain aligned with the United States.

### **Long-Term Scenarios for Strategic Environment**

Now, let me briefly examine long-term regional security environments, about 30 to 40 years from now. Since Japan's position is more or less dependent on its alliance relationship with the U.S. and Russia's future influence seems to be limited, I give more weight on the China factor and the U.S. factor.

If the United States still maintains its current policy of active engagement in East Asia through forward deployment of forces and military alliance with regional powers, there are two possible long-term scenarios. First, the "U.S.-led uni-multipolar scenario" will be materialized if China fails to catch up with the United States in national capabilities. Second, if socialist China successfully catches up with the United States, then the "major systemic crisis scenario" would occur.

The U.S.-led uni-multipolar stability scenario pictures the status quo. In this scenario, the U.S.-Japan alliance and NATO will be the main security framework for United States engagement policies. The United States will see its alliance with Japan as beneficial to maintaining East Asian regional order and, therefore, will keep it. The socialist China and Russia will remain dissatisfied

but basically acknowledge or accept the U.S. leadership in the region. In this scenario, Korea and Taiwan will enjoy regional stability and Taiwan will maintain its independence from China's potential military threat.

If, on the other hand, China perceives that it successfully catches up with or even overtakes the United States, then the major systemic crisis scenario will be materialized. If the United States anticipates that China's challenge is imminent, it will try to protect its sphere of influence in the region and maintain the existing security order. The United States may attempt to build the virtual triangular alliance among the U.S., Korea, and Japan. The United States may consider re-normalizing diplomatic ties with Taiwan and eventually form a military alliance with it. The United States may improve its relationships with India as well. With reformulation of its alliance structure, the United States alliance members will surround Chinese mainland. With Japan, Korea, and Taiwan from China's south and west, and India from east, the United States alliances will checkmate China's move. The NATO will also play a crucial role in tying Russia down so as not to form an alliance with China. In this kind of situation, a major war between the declining status quo power and rising revisionist power is highly likely. This major systemic crisis scenario suggests increased military and political roles for Japan and Korea, and an improved relationship between the U.S. and Taiwan.

The above two scenarios are plausible only if the United States adopts a policy of internationalism. But, what if the United States decides to change its policy from internationalism to isolationism? The United States is more likely to switch its policy of internationalism to that of isolationism if it perceives its relative power declines to its supreme challenger, China. If the United States decides to appease to China's imminent challenge, then the "appeasement or bandwagon scenario" will materialize. In this scenario, the U.S. interests is not threatened by Chinese effort to reclaim its traditional hegemony in East Asia because China aims not to be global power but to be regional hegemon.

In this scenario, the U.S. will sever its alliance ties with both Japan and Korea and accommodate China's regional hegemonic status. And the United States is more likely to adopt an appeasement policy toward China. Other small and weak neighbors will bandwagon as well. Korea, because of a lack of capabilities to stand alone, would bandwagon to the threatening power.

The "balance of power scenario" will transpire if China fails to catch up with the United States in national power. In this case, three more or less equal

powers--China, Japan, and Russia--will check each other's aggression. Although the United States will remain as the strongest power in the system, it will be involved only minimally in regional politics.

The balance of power scenario suggests that the United States will not keep its military alliance ties with Japan or Korea. Unless any one great power tries to break the status quo, the United States will remain uninvolved. Only when the regional status quo and its national interests in the region are threatened the United States will play the role of "balancer."

This scenario also presupposes that the United States is satisfied with maritime dominance while accepting Chinese dominance in the continent. In this kind of situation, Japan will not rely on the United States for its security protection. Instead, Japan will increase its military. Japan, China, and Russia will compete against each other for influence in the region. In this scenario, heated competition between China and Japan would be expected. Japan, China, and Russia will try to increase their influence on the Korean peninsula. In addition, China and Japan may compete over the influence on Taiwan. Especially, Japan may try to build an alliance relationship with Taiwan, while China tries to unify Taiwan with its military superiority.

Table 1 summarizes four scenarios described above. These four scenarios are based on the assumption that China continues to maintain the socialist regime type and to be very much dissatisfied with the existing regional security order. I can come up with four more scenarios by assuming that China becomes a constructive member of the regional society in the next thirty to forty years. That is, if a future China becomes more democratic, less provocative and more flexible in handling foreign affairs. Table 2 summarizes four scenarios with cooperative China.

(Table 1 about here)

(Table 2 about here)

If the United States maintains its foreign policy of active engagement in East Asia through forward deployment of forces and military alliance with regional powers, there are two possible scenarios. If China fails to catch up with the United States, the situation will be the same as the U.S.-led uni-multipolar stability scenario except that the United States will cooperate with China rather than compete with it.

In case a cooperative China succeeds in catching up with the United States, the two superpowers will not resort to arms to resolve the conflict of interests. Instead of challenging the existing, U.S.-led regional security order, China is likely to accept the status quo and therefore the U.S. will allow China to share its regional leadership position without a struggle. I call this the U.S.-China condominium scenario, or Pax Consortis in which major powers in the region including the U.S., Japan and China cooperate each other.

If the United States decides to change its policy from internationalism to isolationism, while a cooperative China successfully catches up with the United States, then the China-led stability will materialize. This situation will be the same as the appeasement scenario except that China will be less likely to attempt to rewrite the existing rules of the game. The situation will be similar to the U.S.-led uni-multipolar stability scenario except that the United States will not exercise its influence on regional security too greatly.

If China fails to catch up with the United States in national power, while the United States pursues the policy of isolation, three more or less equal powers -- China, Japan, and Russia -- will check and balance each other. This situation is the same as the balance of power scenario except that China is more likely to support the existing regional order and the conflict among three powers is less likely.

No matter which type of scenarios becomes the reality, as long as China becomes fully cooperative and abides by the rules of the free market system, the region will be more likely to be stable.

### **Short-Term Change of Strategic Environment**

In the long-term scenarios, there is a potential for China to challenge the U.S. leadership. In the short-term, however, it is very clear that China will not have enough time to catch up with the United States.

In the next five to ten years, North Korea will still pose a considerable threat to Northeast Asian stability with its continued development efforts of weapons of mass destruction. Russia will still face political and economic vulnerabilities and uncertain international status. Japan will be more likely to accomplish the status of “normal state,” but still be dependent upon the United States in security matters. China will pursue economic reform and its “one-China” policy, while maintaining its current form of socialist free market system. The United States will maintain its



policy of active engagement. I can rather confidently forecast that status quo will be maintained, and thus the future system in the short-term perspective will still be the United States-led “uni-multipolar system.

### **Conclusion: U.S. Force Presence in East Asia**

According to recent reports by the Commission on America’s National Interests and by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the U.S. “vital” national interests in East Asia include: preventing the emergence of any regional hegemonic power; containing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, primarily nuclear weapons and missile technology, biological and chemical weapons; and ensuring continued military, political, and commercial access to and through the region. These vital national interests suggest that the United States will pursue the policy of internationalism in the years to come.

Revisionists have long argued for withdrawal of the United States troops in East Asia. However, I expect continuation of the United States policy of active engagement in this region. Recently, several leaders of the United States, including former Secretary of Defense William Cohen, have reconfirmed the engagement policy and indicated U.S. willingness to maintain a forward military presence in Korea even after unification. The 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) also suggests the U.S. military presence in East Asia even after the Korean unification. The new “Defense Guidelines” between the U.S. and Japan is another indication.

Some modifications could be made in the size, missions, and nature of the United States forces in the region, depending on the changes of the security environment. However, as long as the United States strategic interests exist in the region, the United States will maintain its forward deployment structure in an effective and viable form.

Based on the short-term speculation, the current United States-Japan and Korea-United States alliances will play an important role on deterring the potential North Korea’s aggression and maintaining stable regional security order including Taiwan’s sovereignty. China will be threatened by the strengthened U.S.-Japan alliance and their joint development efforts of the missile defense(MD) system. But, on the other hand, China will want to see the U.S.-Japan alliance neither too tight nor too loose. At a minimum, China will not like to see an independently postured Japan. (Art 1998/99; Christensen 1999)

What about the potential for China's challenge in the long run? As I have briefly discussed, there are mixed views. While some suggest that China will attain a rising hegemonic status that can compete with the United States in the next 30 to 40 years, others are very skeptical about China's potential for a regional hegemonic status. It is of course consequential to know which speculation is more likely to become the reality. However, I believe that the perception and misperception problem is more important. Even if most agree that China would fail to catch up to the United States, China may still think that it is strong enough to challenge the United States. Although the Soviet Union never reached a hegemonic status in retrospect, it was considered a "legitimate" challenger to the United States during the Cold War era. Just like the Soviet case, China is highly likely to be considered a "legitimate" challenger to the United States hegemonic status in the years to come.

In addition to China's potential growth, the newly burgeoning nationalism in China and its sensitivity to the Taiwan issue could constitute major stumbling blocks for China to be a responsible actor in the existing regional order. Even though all the scenarios I have mentioned are conceivable, these speculations will lead us to two highly likely scenarios--the U.S.-led unimultipolar stability and the major systemic crisis scenarios.

At this moment, the U.S. is well postured at least to respond to the potential crisis situation in the Korean peninsula. However, in case of the Korean unification, there might be strong popular pressure for the withdrawal of all U.S. forces in East Asia. A complete withdrawal of the U.S. forces from Korea or from Japan would not be in the interest of Korea, Japan or the United States. Especially, the U.S. should seek ways to ensure that it could keep its forces on the peninsula or on Japan even after the Korea unification. To maintain the U.S.-led, stable unimultipolar system and to secure its vital national interests in the region, the United States should maintain its ties both with Japan and Korea and keep its forward deployment of forces especially in Japan.

After the Korean unification the U.S. may withdraw most of its forces from the Korean peninsula except for a small number of "rapid response" force as a token of the still remaining U.S.-Korea military alliance. In Japan, the U.S. may also have to carry out a considerable reduction in troop numbers along with their reassignment to less intrusive locations. However, certain U.S. facilities will be critical to U.S. ability to project power and to prepare for potential crisis situation in case the major systemic crisis scenario materializes. The naval facilities at

Yokosuka and air base at Kadena will play vital roles. By securing naval facilities at Yokosuka the U.S. will be able to base aircraft carriers in Japan. The air base at Kadena, Okinawa will be the only U.S. air base within tactical fighter range of Taiwan.

In addition, the U.S. should also make every effort to cultivate pro-Americanism both in Korea and Japan, and find ways to persuade the Korean and the Japanese people of the value of a continued U.S. military presence even after the Korean unification. Reductions of U.S. forces in Korea and Japan should occur only in the context of a restructuring of the U.S. alliance relationships with Korea and Japan aimed at ensuring the long-term viability of the alliances.

Finally, the United States' continued efforts to pursue the policy of comprehensive engagement toward China are also critical. The United States, Japan, and Korea should make efforts to induce China to become an important and responsible member of the democratic and free market-oriented regional order. As long as China pursues economic prosperity and becomes less challengeable to existing regional order, no matter which scenario becomes the reality, the regional system is more likely to be stable.

**Table 1**  
**Four Scenarios**  
**with Socialist China**

		U.S. takes the policy of	
		Internationalism	Isolationism
	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Successfully Catches up with the U.S.</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Major Systemic Crisis Scenario</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Bandwagon Scenario</b></p>
<b>China</b>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Fails to catch up with the U.S.</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>U.S. led Uni- Multipolar Stability Scenario</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Unstable Balance of Power Scenario</b></p>

**Table 2**  
**Four Scenarios**  
**with Cooperative China**

U.S. takes the policy of		
	Internationalism	Isolationism
<b>China</b>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Successfully</b>  <b>Catches up</b>  <b>with the U.S.</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>U.S.-China</b>  <b>Condominium Scenario</b></p>
	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>China-led</b>  <b>Stability Scenario</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>U.S. led Uni-</b>  <b>Multipolar Stability</b>  <b>Scenario</b></p>
	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Fails to</b>  <b>catch up</b>  <b>with the U.S.</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Stable</b>  <b>Balance of Power</b>  <b>Scenario</b></p>

## (Endnotes)

---

<sup>1</sup> John Naisbitt, *Megatrends in Asia* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 1995); Nye (1997/1998); *The Economist*, October 1, 1994, p. 4; *The Economist*, January 3, 1998, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Segal, "East Asia and the Constraintment of China," *International Security*, vol.20, no.4 (Spring 1996), pp.107-135; William Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security*, vol.24, no.1 (Summer 1999), pp.5-41; Avery Goldstein also argues that China's capabilities will never catch up with that of the United States in the early part of the twenty-first century. Avery Goldstein, "Great Expectations: Interpreting China's Arrival," *International Security*, vol.22, no.3 (Winter 1997), pp.36-73.

<sup>3</sup> For the relationship between perception and misperception and the likelihood of conflict, see Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1973); Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Jack Levy, "Misperception and the Causes of War: Theoretical Linkages and Analytical Problems," *World Politics*, vol. 36, no.1 (1983), pp. 76-99.

<sup>4</sup> Segal(1996); David Shambaugh, "Containment or Engagement of China? Calculating Beijing's Responses," *International Security*, vol.21, no.2 (Fall 1996), pp.180-209; In addition to the policies of engagement and of isolationism, Robert Art adds a policy of selective engagement. Robert J.

---

Art, "Geopolitics Updated: The Strategy of Selective Engagement," *International Security*, vol.23, no.3 (Winter 1998/99), pp.79-113.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Huntington names the current United States-led system as the "uni-multipolar" system, while Joseph Nye calls it the United States "preponderant" system. See, Joseph Nye, "Redefining the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs*, vol.78, no.4 (July/August), pp.22-35; Samuel Huntington, "The Lonely Superpower," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 78, no. 2 (March/April 1999), pp.35-49.