



UNISCI Discussion Papers

GEOPOLITICS OF NORTH EAST ASIA: THE U.S. PERSPECTIVE

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In the post-Cold War era, the defence elites in the United States consider North East Asia as one of the most important strategic regions, next to Europe and the Middle East.² There are three reasons for the U.S.'s strategic consideration: the region contains 1) the most dynamic economy on this planet in the recent decades, 2) the most populated countries in the world, such as China, and 3) the last Cold War fronts, such as the one in between the Taiwan Strait, and the 38th parallel or the so-called Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) on the Korean Peninsula.

Although there were many conflicts, this region's power balance was relatively stabilized throughout the Cold War period, because the balance was largely maintained by a nuclear standoff between the two superpowers: the Soviet Union and the United States. In other words, the region's frame work (or so-called 'system') was 'bipolarity.'³ However, the sudden collapse of East Germany and the eventual fall of the Communist Soviet Union changed all of these, from the end of 1980s to the beginning of the 1990s. In addition to this process of the end of the Cold War, the recent dramatic rise of China indicates another significant change has taken place in the regional power balance. In essence, North East Asia in the post-Cold War era has become more or less 'balanced multipolar' or a 'tripolar' world, where the United States, Russia, and China compete for power.⁴

In order to understand and explain this complicated regional power relationship, first, we need to have a strategic map, based on a deep understanding of the geography of the region. In essence, the traditional 'geopolitical' analysis is quite useful for this. It is true, however, that there has been much debate that geopolitical analysis is outdated, especially due to the recent globalizing phenomena around the world.⁵ Yet this type of accusation is wrong headed. As long as geography exists in this material world, it severally affects the power relationship of

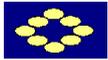
¹ Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores. Estos artículos no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI. The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors. These articles do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI.

² Art, Robert J. (2003): *A Grand Strategy for America*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, p. 8

³ For the most famous debate on the Cold War's 'bipolarity,' see Waltz, Kenneth N. (1979): *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, Addison-Wesley.

⁴ For a notable argument of the world becoming 'multipolarity,' see Mearsheimer, John J.: "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War", *International Security*, Vol. 15. No. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 5-56.

⁵ One of the most notable accusations recently made was by Fettweis, Christopher: "Sir Halford Mackinder, Geopolitics, and Policy making in the 21st century", *Parameters* (Summer 2000), pp. 58-71.



states, particularly onto statecraft and strategic thinking. This article first explores the basic idea of geopolitics and its use for the formulation of the U.S. grand strategy, then attempts to provide a clearer picture of the strategic situation in the one of the most vital regions for the U.S.: North East Asia.

1. The U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War

The U.S.'s concept of 'grand strategy' comes from the term coined by a remarkable British strategist/military historian, Basil Liddell Hart. He defined it as "the policy governing [the use of military force] and combining it with other weapons: economic, political, and psychological."⁶ In this sense, this concept goes beyond mere generalship or deterrence in peace time; it is about achieving security in a multidimensional way, to serve in both peace and war.

Geopolitics, which was began in the late nineteenth century by the Prussian General Staff, was aimed to help in formulating a German grand strategy. Their basic concept was further developed and summarized by a British geographer/politician, Halford J. Mackinder. In a series of seminal writings, he provided the three fundamental concepts for the U.S.'s grand strategy; 1) historical antagonism between 'sea power' and 'land power', 2) denial of Eurasian dominance by a land power state, 3) emphasis on the strategic importance of 'the Marginal-Crescent' or later called 'Rimland'.⁷

During the Cold War, the grand strategy that the U.S. employed was 'containment,' which was coined by an ex-U.S. diplomat/ historian, George F. Kennan, who has recently passed away.⁸ It was revised on a few occasions, yet the basic strategic direction followed was along the line of Mackinder's three geopolitical maxims. Besides, the 'sea power' U.S. government continued to follow it until its final victory over its 'land power' adversary, the Soviet Union.

It was the end of the Cold War when the 9/11 attacks occurred and, to some extent, they seemed to provide the U.S. an excellent opportunity to revise its grand strategy for the first time in many decades. As Charles A. Kupchan argues, the U.S. had to come up with a new geopolitical map of the world in order to have a new grand strategy.⁹ Some have argued right after the Cold War that there would be an emergence of a so-called "New Geopolitics" in the world.¹⁰ However, none of them matches with the reality of the post-Cold War world and even less so after the terrorist attack in the U.S. in 2001.¹¹ The traditional geopolitical reality remains dominant, and this is especially true in North East Asia.

⁶ Liddell Hart, Basil H. (1991): *Strategy*, 2nd/Rev ed. New York, Plume Books, p. 31.

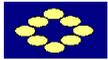
⁷ All Mackinder's major works on geopolitics are collected in *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (1981), Westport, Greenwood Press. The more comprehensive analysis of Mackinder's indication for the Anglo-American grand strategy, see Gray, Colin S. (1988): *The Geopolitics of Superpower*. Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, especially pp. 4-12.

⁸ Kennan was well aware of Mackinder's geopolitical grand strategic concept. See Kennan, George F. (1984): *American Diplomacy: 1990-1950*, expanded ed. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, especially pp. 5-7.

⁹ Charles A. Kupchan, "The End of American Era", (Alfred A. Knopf: New York), 2002. pp.36.

¹⁰ For example, see Dibb, Paul; Hale, David D., and Prince, Peter: "Asia's Insecurity", *Survival*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Autumn 1999), pp. 5-20.

¹¹ However, there is a possible (yet weak) alternative candidate for U.S.'s new geopolitical map, which is provided by one official in Pentagon. See Barnett, Thomas P. M. (2004): *The Pentagon's New Map*. New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons.



2. A New Geopolitical Map of North East Asia

How do the U.S. policy elites see the strategic reality or, rather, the ‘geopolitical map’ of North East Asia? Although it is still in the process of formulation after the end of the Cold War, U.S. elites clearly recognize that there are three crucial factors in the regional geopolitical map: balance of power, fault lines, and trends of power shift.

The relative ‘power’ of a state is determined by its economic strength, population size and its military strength.¹² Currently, the top three powerful states forming possible ‘power poles’ in the region are China, Japan, and Russia. However, none is a potential hegemonic candidate yet. In addition, the U.S. presence in this region is quite substantial, although its homeland is geographically apart. Another consideration is that Japan does not possess any nuclear warheads, despite its wealth and population. Therefore, the power balance of North East Asia is considered as ‘tripolar’, which consists of the top three states: the United States, China, and Russia.¹³

From its combination of historical reasons and power politics, geopolitical fault lines lie in the region at three (or possibly four) parts: the 38th parallel border between North Korea and South Korea, the Taiwan Strait between the mainland China and Taiwan, the Kuril Straits between Japan and Russia, and possibly the Sea of Japan between Japan and South Korea, due to the recent territorial turmoil. Although I counted the fault line at Kuril Straits as one of the three crucial in the region, its relative importance and prospect of conflict became considerably low, due to Russia’s recent economic weakness. Thus, we can say that this fault line is fairly stable one, though the possibility of conflict still remains.

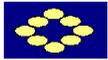
Three dynamics in power shifting trends in this region are the rise of Chinese power, the decline of Russian power, and the uncertain future American role in the region. As we see everywhere in news and journals, China’s fast growing economy is becoming a great concern for the region, especially because China can easily transfer its economic wealth to military might.¹⁴ As mentioned above, the decline of Russian power is another significant trend. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and a radical exposure to the western market system, Russia has been suffering tremendous economic losses, and this hampered its pursuit of an ambitious foreign policy agenda in the region since the 1990s. Finally, but certainly not least, the uncertainty of the U.S.’s future regional commitment is another significant new trend in the area. It is true that traditional U.S. allies in the region, such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, prefer that “the U.S. retain strategic superiority in the region but are uncertain about its intention and capability.”¹⁵ The U.S.’s confusion on its strategic direction, therefore, creates uncertainty among the regional powers.

¹² Although there are intensive arguments on the measurement of ‘power,’ which are represented as ‘tangible vs. intangible’ measurement, I use here ‘tangible’ measurement. For example, see Mearsheimer, John J. (2001): *The Tragedy of the Great Power Politics*. New York, W. W. Norton, especially Ch. 3, pp. 55-82. For another argument, see Brooks, Stephen G. and Wohlforth, William C.: “Power Globalization and the End of the Cold War”, *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Winter 2000/2001), pp.5-53.

¹³ This analysis was based on the data from International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) (2004): *The Military Balance 2004/2005*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ For a recent examples, see FP Special Report “China Rising”, *Foreign Policy* (Jan./Feb. 2005), pp. 43-59.

¹⁵ Tow, William T. (2001): *Asia-Pacific Strategic Relations*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 205-206.



3. America's strategic choice: three degrees of commitment

However, there is much debate on the U.S.'s post-Cold War grand strategy, based on the geopolitical map and power trends mentioned above.¹⁶ Broadly speaking, there are three types of grand strategy which have been discussed by a number of notable American strategists in the past decade—I define them as ‘full engagement,’ ‘disengagement,’ and ‘selective engagement.’

‘Full engagement’ is, in other words, world domination by the United States. This imperial strategy suggests that the U.S. dictates the world. This strategy would be executed by advocating a Wilsonian democratic ideal on the surface, and promoting free market economies in reality. This has traditionally been articulated by the American hard right as a ‘rollback’ strategy, particularly by neoconservative intellectuals, and most recently by President George W. Bush.¹⁷ Thomas P.M. Barnett’s *The Pentagon’s New Map* and ‘NSC-68’ (another version of the Cold War containment policy, which was authored by Paul Nitze and others) can be categorized as this type to a certain extent.¹⁸ Although it might be the ideal strategy to protect American national interest, the problem is that it is almost impossible to carry out. The main reason is that it costs too much in every aspect: militarily, economically and politically. This strategy requires the U.S. to act more unilaterally, and this will certainly lead to a creation of an anti-U.S. coalition all over the world. In brief, this strategy is too risky.

‘Disengagement’ is the total opposite of ‘full engagement.’ This strategy generally aims to withdraw from the balance-of-power politics in the Eurasian continent. Thus, this means that the U.S.'s military presence should be reduced or completely eradicated from foreign soil. In general, there are two kinds of ‘disengagement’ strategies involved. The first is ‘isolationism’, and the other is ‘offshore balancing’.¹⁹ The former aims at the complete withdrawal from political-military involvement in the Eurasian land mass, and the latter aims in the same direction, except for occasional maintenance of the Eurasian balance of power. Both suggest bringing troops back home, yet ‘offshore balancing’ involves political (and of course, if necessary, military) interventions such as the United Kingdom exercised against the European continent for centuries.

The problem with these strategies lies in the fact that they are against one of America's vital interests: commitment to global politics. By losing its presence on Eurasian soil, the U.S. would lose its status as the only great power in the world. In the beginning, these strategies might be hugely welcomed by countries all over the world, and those economic nationalists in the U.S. who oppose the huge expenditure on military spending would certainly be happy with the dramatic reduction. Yet as soon as regional political competitions resurface, people in the world will miss the U.S. presence; at least, this is what the U.S. political-military elites think.

¹⁶ For example, see Posen, Barry R. and Ross, Andrew L.: “Competing Vision for U.S. Grand Strategy”, *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Winter 1996-97), pp. 5-53.

¹⁷ President Bush's recent call for ‘full engagement’ strategy was indicated in his second inaugural speech. For this analysis, see Reynolds, Paul: “Bush Speaks—now what?”, *BBC news* (UK edition), 22 January 2005, in <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4198133.stm>. For ‘rollback’ strategy, see Gray, *op. cit.*, especially Ch. 13, pp. 165-174.

¹⁸ See Barnett, *op. cit.* For the relationship between the Cold War containment policy and Nitze's ‘NSC-68,’ see Gaddis, John Lewis (1992): *The United States and the End of the Cold War*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, especially pp. 27-31.

¹⁹ For ‘offshore balancing’ strategy see Layne, Christopher: “From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy”, *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Summer 1997), pp. 46-61. For ‘isolationist’ strategy, see Nordlinger, Eric (1995): *Isolationism Reconfigured*. Princeton, Princeton University Press; and Buchanan, Patrick J. (1999): *A Republic, Not an Empire*. Washington D.C., Regnery Publishing.



‘Selective engagement’ aims at somewhere in a middle ground between ‘full engagement’, and ‘disengagement’.²⁰ This strategy was famously asserted in the beginning of the Cold War era by then young diplomat, George F. Kennan, under the name of ‘containment’ policy. The problem of this strategy is, of course, that it is really hard to bring about a consensus among the elites on the question: ‘What goal the U. S. should pursue?’ This is a complex strategy, because it does not articulate a clear method as both ‘full engagement’ and ‘disengagement’ suggest. As proponents of this strategy suggest, there are always three critical developments that the U.S. should consider: “the loss of [its] economic might, loss of its military technological edge, or the rise of a counter-coalition.”²¹ In addition, ‘selective engagement’ does not define a clear strategic goal. Rather, this is a statement of an on-going process. As Kennan’s multifaceted ‘containment’ policy could not suggest a goal after the completion of the ‘containment’ stage, ‘selective engagement’ falls into a similar dilemma: engaging selectively, then what?

What will the U.S. choose from these three strategic choices? The most apparent fact is that the U.S. will use these three in a combination. As President Bush recently indicated in his second inaugural speech earlier this year, the U.S. government will use ‘full engagement’ as a rhetoric,²² but in reality it is using ‘selective engagement’, while it is lured to follow a ‘disengagement’ strategy.

4. What does Geopolitics suggest the U.S. and the North East Asia do?

As the above mentioned new geopolitical map of North East Asia suggests, the region has a serious potential for strategic conflicts among its players, especially between Japan and China. However, the center piece of this geopolitical map is a power competition between the U.S. and China, and this fact seems unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Although China’s threat level does not equate with that created by the Soviet Union against the U.S. during the Cold War period, the fact still remains that the only possible future great power competitor for the U.S. is China.²³ Half of the Pentagon officials and perhaps a large number of the top officials in the U.S. government think this way.²⁴

Then, what does geopolitics suggest the U.S. should do in this region? One possible answer is to take a strategy somewhere between ‘selective engagement’ and ‘offshore balancing.’ From a geopolitical reason, the U.S. should initiate, and eventually will initiate, a regional ‘sea power’ alliance in order to oppose a ‘land power’ alliance, which will be lead by China and possibly Russia. The key factor in the short term will be a unification of the Korean Peninsula, because if the Koreans become one, there is a strong possibility that the united Korea would join the Chinese land power alliance and thus the power balance in the region would radically shift in favor of the Chinese. Since this indicates the emergence of a great land power state in the Eurasian land mass, it is a nightmare scenario for a sea power state such as the U.S.

²⁰ For ‘selective engagement’ strategy, see Art, Robert J.: “Geopolitics Updated: The Strategy of Selective Engagement”, *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Winter 1998-1999), pp. 72-113. And also by Art, *A Grand Strategy for America*. On a similar view, see Brzezinski, Zbigniew (1997): *The Grand Chessboard*. New York, Basic Books.

²¹ Art, *A Grand Strategy...*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

²² See n. 16.

²³ On the recent geopolitical debate on the growing power of China, see “Clash of the Titans”, *Foreign Policy*, (Jan/ Feb. 2005). pp. 46-50.

²⁴ For example, see Barnett, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-99.



However, the long term focus for the U.S. elites is, and always will be, China. The U.S. will take whatever means necessary to prevent the land power of China from establishing hegemony in the region. In turn, China will respond to this power game in its own way. The recent bitter diplomatic relations between Japan and China can be seen as a latent geopolitical struggle between the U.S. and China.

‘Power’ is a crucial factor in the study of international politics, and geopolitical analysis is certainly one way to look at this factor very seriously. It is true that geopolitical analysis *seems* to be obsolete and outdated in this globalizing, post-Cold War, post- 9-11 era. No one, however, can understand the underlying forces driving North East Asian politics without being aware of the usefulness of geopolitics. The U.S. elites are fully aware of this fact, and will exercise and apply this theory in political reality.