

Introduction:

East Asian Geopolitics and Identity

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On an early day in January 2004, Professor Mau-kuei Chang and I had lunch at the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) in Leiden. We were both fellows of IIAS and, as IIAS fellows do, went to have light lunch of Dutch Gouda cheese, cucumber salad and chocolate pastry in the cosy IIAS dining room. Since we were meeting for the first time, we made our introductions and began discussing subjects of mutual interest.

Professor Chang told me how concerned he was about the rising tension between China and Taiwan, and that Taiwan's search for identity, although having historic reasons, is creating such a difficult situation. I told him very frankly how much I was concerned about Prime Minister Koizumi's Asian policy which, notwithstanding its equally deep-rooted historic origins, seemed to be driving Japan into greater tension with its Asian neighbours. We completely agreed that at the basis of the respective situations lay a common issue which may be loosely defined as 'nationalism'. We also agreed that this issue constitutes a crucial factor in the context of China and South Korea. Somehow from this luncheon, there emerged an idea that it might be useful to hold a seminar or workshop to discuss the common issue of rising 'nationalism' in East Asia.

The idea quickly took shape. Associate Professor Koen De Ceuster of the Leiden University immediately agreed to discuss the issue of South Korea. With the help of the IIAS Secretariat, we extended our reach to Dr. Phil Deans, Director of the Contemporary China Institute, School of Oriental and Asian Studies (SOAS), University of London, to discuss China. Professor Kurt Radtke, who was in Leiden on sabbatical from the University of Waseda agreed to moderate the seminar. Those who were stationed in Leiden held several preliminary discussions on the subject and streamlined their views.

The seminar organized by the IIAS took place on 25 May 2004 in Amsterdam under the title 'Emerging Self-assertion in East Asia' and

the four presentations were summarized in the IIAS Newsletter, no. 34 of July 2004. But the four mousquetaires did not stop their academic endeavours there, and having received enormous encouragement from *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* which, upon a referee process, agreed to publish their papers, they each continued to write an article by October 2004. The final edited versions were presented in April 2005.

In writing and discussing the issue of 'national self assertion' in East Asia, we came to a better understanding of several factors, such as geopolitics, history and societal changes which characterize this issue both in the region and in the respective countries. This topic is highly relevant to the rising geopolitics and security of East Asia. Current geopolitics in East Asia can be summarized by three major factors: the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of Russia as a major security factor; the rise of China in all aspects of international relations; and the changing role of the US as a single winner of the Cold War and globalization but deeply preoccupied by international terrorism and the war in Iraq.

Two issues have become a real security danger in this situation: North Korean nuclearization and the Taiwan Strait crisis. On North Korea, given the nature of the crisis and the way it is observed by Kim Jong Il, the fundamental solution lies in US–North Korea relations. But in achieving this final goal, a more self-assertive role played by China, South Korea, and to a lesser extent, Japan, has become essential. As for the Taiwan Strait, the origin of the crisis itself is national self-assertion and a search for identity both in Taiwan and China.

At the same time, 'national self-assertion' is deeply rooted in the history and societal changes of each nation. The transformation of Maoist China towards Deng Xiaoping's reform resulted in the emergence of nationalism to legitimize the role of the Communist Party. But the changing social structure created another nationalism which became the rallying cry of those who challenge the Communist Party, as culminated in the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. Rising economic, political and military power in the 1990s and the leadership's intention to create an environment favourable for economic growth made China's self-assertiveness more convincing to the outside world, but the society is fraught with internal tensions amplified by nationalist aspirations. China's policy is appearing at the intersection of external policy and internal tension.

Decades of efforts geared towards economic prosperity and indigenization of Taiwanese politics resulted in the creation of a multi-party system based on democratic elections in Taiwan. But the society was deeply

divided around the issue of nationalism: whether to seek, ultimately, a Taiwanese identity or reunification with the Chinese Mainland.

South Korea strived hard to prosper economically under several military regimes, but national elections were introduced in 1987, a non-military president was elected in 1993, and the country began to enjoy both the fruits of prosperity and democracy. President Kim Dae-Jung's 'Sunshine Policy' made a breakthrough in its relations with North Korea, a substantial rapprochement with China, and an audacious reconciliation with Japan. The growing disconnect with the US brought South Korea rapidly towards a more self-assertive policy, based on a nationalist aspiration for reunification and the search for a leadership role in the East Asian community. A Korea-centred diplomacy is emerging.

Japan managed, though gradually, to liberate itself after the end of the Cold War from four decades of passive pacifism. But its inability to overcome the memory of the past in harmony with its Asian neighbours is creating real difficulties in its foreign policy. The intransigence of the nationalists has put Japan's policy towards Russia in jeopardy, hardened its North Korean policy, and is creating political strife in its relations with China.

In the year since the Amsterdam workshop, several important changes have taken place. China's rapprochement with many political forces in Taiwan is quite remarkable, although the issue of Taiwanese identity has been left unanswered. In contrast to this, relations between China and Japan nearly exploded in the spring of 2005 – history and geopolitics, amplified by rising nationalistic emotions on both sides, being the underlying causes. South Korea in March reverted to its pre-1998 stern policy of criticism over Japan's historic legacy.

In concluding, I would like to underline that, although each of the four writers came up with hints or suggestions on policy recommendations, the major purpose of our analyses was to lend greater clarity to the issue of 'national self-assertion' and to show the centrality of this issue for the peace and stability of each country and for the East Asian region in general. Any critical feedback from the readership would be highly welcome.

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