Continuity and Transformation in Northeast Asia and the End of American Exceptionalism:
A Long-Range Outlook and US Policy Implications

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Abstract

In the next half century Northeast Asia will undergo a profound transformation. Yet, enduring continuities will remain that will continue to fundamentally influence the emerging security order. Perhaps the most important phenomenon will be not only the rise of China, but the concomitant relative decline of the US that will lead to the end of the special role and position the US has occupied since 1945. Korea and China will both be unified, removing the two most critical hot spots in the region. China will become a rich developed nation and will more aggressively seek its perceived rightful great-power position in the region and the world. Unified Korea will attempt to remain a neutral nexus in the region, but will be unable to do so and instead be inevitably drawn to the Chinese sphere unless the US takes active measures to keep it in the US camp. Japan will be ravaged by a ruinous demographic trend that exacerbates a poor geographical basis for a great power and become a second-rate power more than ever dependent on the US for security. The emergent order will be a regional bipolar balance of power between China and the US. Russia and unified Korea are possible members of the Chinese bloc while Japan will be the critical partner to the US bloc. The balance of power situation will be structurally stable and contribute to the maintenance of peace and stability if allowed to mature.
Northeast Asia\textsuperscript{1} is poised on the threshold of the most significant transformation of its security order since the Korean War. The prospect of a Korean unification is only the beginning of processes and trends that will result in a fundamentally altered regional order. These trends and processes will not take place overnight nor in a few years or even a decade or two. It will take 40 to 50 years for these processes to play

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\textsuperscript{1} Northeast Asia, for the purpose of this study, includes China, Japan and Korea, but not Russia. After much thought and discussion with experts on Russia in the US and Korea, and a personal visit to Russia and discussions with Russian analysts, the author decided not to include Russia in this study. It is a judgment call based on relevance and potential of Russia's future role in the region. The author has come to the conclusion that Russia's future, even 50 years out, remains relatively bleak. Although it is trying to play a role in Northeast Asian affairs, it is unlikely that Russia will be able to significantly influence the emerging order. Similarly, in examining the role and position of Russia in Northeast Asia in the past, present and future Robert Ross wrote "Despite Russia's presence in Northeast Asia, its status as a regional pole has been tenuous and rare, primarily because of the inhospitable geography separating the Russian Far East from western Russia." Although the Soviet Union in its heyday attempted to establish a great power military presence in Northeast Asia, "contemporary Russian presence in the Far East is closer to the historical norm." He concluded that "Even should Moscow stabilize its authority and the economy greatly improve, Russia will not devote the resources necessary to become a pole in East Asia. Rather, it will focus its limited resources first on the former republics of the Soviet Union and then on the expanded US presence in Eastern Europe. Northeast Asia will likely be of third importance." Robert S. Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-first Century," \textit{International Security}, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Spring 1999), pp. 87–90. Russian analysts in the Russian Far East generally agreed with this conclusion (author's interviews November 2000). However, we cannot rule out the negative impact that Russia can inflict therefore complicate situations and processes such as transferring military gear, know-how, and technology to China and North Korea. For the long term Russia will be focused on its internal situation and, externally, on its western borders.