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Some 21st Century Opportunities and Threats in East Asia

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The "dynamic transformation of regional order" in East Asia is not a particularly new phenomenon: the region has long been well known for ideological, political, cultural, and military conflicts: albeit perhaps on different scales. However, global movements from underdevelopment toward development in the current anarchic international environment is setting the stage for many opportunities and threats to arise. Such situations may be numerous and arise from internal or external condition, but, from the international relations point of view, there are only a handful of central issues.

Balances of Power and Regional Security

As history has so clearly demonstrated, no population size, economic model, ideological predisposition, or military prowess, provides an absolute guarantee of predictable outcomes. Furthermore, none of these factors, as well as any country or region, has a "rightful place" in any century. The simple thing to say is that no matter how large or small, states can only surely be predicted to do one thing: engage in struggles for power. This is mainly because security is the primary concern for all states (although of course not the only concern). In other words, existence trumps all else. There is no modern indicator that this past and present truth is still not the best predictor of a future reality. Each country in East Asia will move through the 21st century, balancing internal and external realities to cultivate and expand power opportunities and security while hedging against the myriad threats based on the unique situation of each.

The difficult part is determining how power struggles will unfold to opportunities and threats since there are numerous domestic and international factors in East Asia. The important thing to remember is that one state's threat can be another state's opportunity and occasionally threats are opportunities in disguise. For example, Japan may seize the opportunity to militarize to balance against perceived threats from China and North Korea yet coincidentally, it is also engaged in territorial disputes with Russia, South Korea and China. Another case is China, which despite the 'peaceful rise' rhetoric, has had double-digit percent increases in military spending almost every year for the past twenty years (this year's increase was 12%, bringing the amount to more than double what Russia spends) which includes a navy that will be bigger than that of the United States by 2020. Is this to balance against the United States in the "Pacific Focus" Or perhaps to continue to redraw international boundaries in ways to best seize opportunities to move South and East as they did to the west in 1950? It is difficult to say, but if China's domestic civil rights abuses and human rights infringements against its own citizens are any indicator, then neighboring countries should probably "hope for the best, but expect the worse". After all, there is a new precedent now with Russia (another Security Council veto power state) deeply infringing on the sovereignty of a neighbor: there is little reason not to expect that China will do the same.

As for South and North Korea, they are both regionally significant for various reasons, but not militarily, so they regularly engage in buck-passing strategies to the US and China respectively for security and breathing room. South Korea has been cultivating its soft power with the Korean Wave and developing complex interdependency with neighbors while North Korea has been developing hard power security in the form of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. The 21st century opportunities and threats in East Asia concerning the Korean peninsula will therefore surely depend on the normalization of these relations. Not doing so could result in catastrophic consequences that would impact the entire region, the US, as well as the EU and Russia. In this way, although the Korean peninsula has often been considered "the shrimp between whales," it might also be considered "the pin in the grenade". Any number of significant incidences could "pull the pin" and transform the region for a hundred years or more.

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