

Strategic Security Issues in North East Asia

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It is not easy to select the specific issues to be included in my presentation devoted to NE Asia security challenges. A spectrum of challenges and uncertainties seems to be too broad today while the vision of politicians supposedly trying to manage the things in security environment is sometimes motivated by the factors which are very difficult to predict and calculate.

To begin with let me try to answer some general questions concerning security situation in NE Asia.

First, what has happened in this sphere since our previous workshop in Vladivostok last March? Have we seen any extraordinary or even remarkable event? The answer is – “negative”¹.

Second, how can we address the security environment in our region in general - a stabile one, deteriorating or improving? Here my answer will be a pragmatic one – “Do not know for sure”.

Thirdly, do I see any signs of change, ‘outside’ factors and tendencies that can affect the security situation in NE Asia? Yes, I do.

Let’s get back to Assertion #1. Of course, one can tell about serious incidents happened on Korean peninsula – the sinking of South Korean warship ‘Cheonan’ in March², the artillery shelling of South Korean Yeonpyeong island in November. True, these incidents were serious and tragic – 50 South Koreans were killed including four

1 The text of the presentation was prepared in early 2011. Accordingly, the death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il that happened in December 2011 was not considered in the paper. Clearly it is a very significant event for the region. The author decided not to change a single word in his February presentation and not to add further comments; let’s see how the situation in DPRK will be changing.

2 See Joint Investigation Report On the Attack Against ROK Ship Cheonan. By the Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea Published by Myungjin Publication Inc. The first print date of the first edition_ September 10, 2010. ISBN 978-89-7677-711-9 03300. Very thorough and informative paper. Some questions still exist yet...

civilians. But the incidents were neither extraordinary nor unexpected.

The tensions along the demilitarized zone continue for many decades, the psychological pressure on young officers and soldiers on both sides is immense. Being a career Navy officer for many years I believe that 'Cheonan' sinking was not a planned provocative move by the North. Rather a North Korean submarine commander mistakenly assessed the active sonar impulses from the frigate as the sign of imminent attack and decided to strike first.

The November incident was different. The gunfire barrage can not be regarded as some kind of an accident. It had to be deliberate and calculated. It had to be a message – but what kind of a message? And has the world correctly interpreted this message?

Previous Pyongyang messages were definitely clearer. Definitely the 2006 and 2009 nuclear tests and Taepodong ballistic missile launches are on top of the list. Official and public reaction in the world made those events quite remarkable. They even occupied the newspaper headlines for a week or two and each time seemingly revitalized the 6-party talks in Beijing. But then...nothing was changing for North Koreans. I figure that even strict sanctions if imposed on DPRK by UN would have been regarded positively by North Korean leadership. But all they could see was oblivion or neglect. Even their close neighbors were preoccupied with their own problems to say nothing about world community in general. Maybe Japan was the only exclusion, but Japan alone can do very little...

Time is rapidly going by with North Korea obviously stalling in a deadlock. The progress of their neighbors in all spheres is evident. Three decades ago the economic situation in DPRK was much better than in PRC. Today anybody traveling along the border can see a striking contrast between two nations. Kim Jong-Il is 69 and suffers from health problems. I can hardly believe that any expert in Korean affairs is seriously thinking that his youngest son Kim Jong-Un (29) can succeed Kim Jong-Il as national leader. Kim the II was learning the secrets of governing the country for 15 years and took the reigns at the age of 52. And yet it took him 4 years to consolidate the power. If Kim Jong-Il passes away in near future his son has almost no chances other than to become a puppet. But who will pull the strings?

The only means of survival for North Korea is to try to adjust to the changing regional and global environment. It can hardly be achieved without radical changes in its domestic political system. Which is quite unlikely now – but who can say it affirmatively? The neighboring economic powers like China or Republic of Korea could assist DPRK in modernization but they are not philanthropists and would need solid

guarantees for their investments. Supposedly Pyongyang will not give any concessions affecting its sovereignty. End of story...

A possible prognosis for strategic developments on Korean peninsula will be the following:

- If things continue as it is now North Korean leadership will try to present its best trump cards as soon as they are ready. What can be the trumps? Worst case scenario – a thermonuclear warhead testing or 'real' ICBM launch. And such a message is not the one that can be ignored.

- There is no imminent threat of armed conflict in Korea. Incidents, clashes and provocative moves along the DMZ are quite possible but will hardly escalate to war level. I can foresee the only situation leading to serious military implications and it is connected with the algorithm of Anti Ballistic Missile Defense system in NE Asia. If the DPRK launches a missile whose ballistic trajectory will be regarded as 'threatening' by Japanese or American ABMD computers, how would they respond? With less than 2 minutes to take a decision for intercept...and realizing that quite possibly the intercept would occur in Russian or Chinese airspace.

Now several comments on Assertion #2, e.g. regional security situation in general. The numerous territorial disputes in Asia Pacific will likely to remain and aggravate the interstate relations. But not to a threatening level. This type of conflicts is generally manageable now by political and diplomatic means. Maybe with one exclusion.

The Arctic ice melting generated by global warming is leading us into potentially dangerous situation. The delimitation of EEZ and continental shelf in Arctic has not been settled legally. Oil and gas corporations do not want to wait until all formalities are done – they want to bite off their share of potentially extremely tasty cake of Arctic natural resources. This 'double' speed, one of national states eager to legally bind their sovereignty in the North, another one of energy companies' burning desire to start exploitation of Arctic resources and waterways represents a real challenge. We have to admit that modern technologies can not guarantee the safety of oil and gas exploration and transportation in the Arctic. Any serious ecological incident in the Extreme North would inevitably lead to disastrous consequences. The Northern environment is very fragile and disaster relief operation here will demand huge resources and efforts.

Another group of factors influencing security situation in our region are closely connected with the very nature of humankind. In fact, they are generated by our common values, morality, prejudices, superstitions and so on. It is a rather complicated topic and I will only briefly mention several key points.

The globalization effects on the people can result in very strange and unexpected tendencies, especially among youth. The national cultures are changing, and not always for good. Governments try to adjust to globalization, to streamline it – but often fail.

Free labor market combined with inadequate governance leads to demographic and social problems. For example, the population of Russian Far East is constantly reducing. Economically active people prefer to move either abroad or to the European part of the country where they hope to get decent working and living conditions. Instead we see a mass immigration of mainly non-educated and non-qualified people from the former Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union – Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan³. We have no official statistics for it but estimates show that more than half of community workers in the cities in Russian Far East (drivers, janitors, public catering employers etc.) are non-residents of Russia.

Specific demographic problems exist in other regional countries, too. In China the pressure of rural population on the economy is very serious though hidden so far. If its permanent GNP growth slows down or stops the internal social stability will collapse. In Japan it is the aging of population, reducing birthrate...maybe something else. Possible national unification is a real nightmare for South Koreans...the list can be continued.

The growth of radical and extremist movements is one more security problem. Such movements easily cross national borders and sometimes produce totally unexpected combinations. Let's recall *AUM Shinrikyo* and *Falcoongong* surprising popularity in Russia⁴. Now many Russians worship Japanese *anime* culture. Of course it in no way means that *anime* or something like that should be considered radical or extremist. What I imply is that its influence on the people belonging to different cultures can bring in very unexpected consequences.

But what scares me most is the expansion of Islam in our region. Islam holy manuscripts are genuinely human and peaceful. The problem is that this confession is

3 Statistic data by Russian Immigration Service is not detailed. Some information may be obtained from the annual “Статистические данные по форме 1-РД «Результаты деятельности территориальных органов за 12 месяцев...года»” (Statistic data on the results of activities of FMS territorial branch offices in ...year), accessible at <http://www.fms.gov.ru/about/ofstat>

4 “AUM Shinrikyo Has More Members in Russia Than in Japan.” Daily News Bulletin (Moscow)/ August 12, 2003. <http://www.rickross.com/reference/aum/aum344.html>

too democratic⁵. To the other hand the '*shariah*' code governs the life of all Muslims in every single detail. You will not avoid external control of what and how you do if you are Muslim – and it is scaring. The suppressed habits, emotions and physical needs (for example, during compulsory *Ramadan* abstinence) can explode one day. Maybe here is the root of '*shahid*' tradition and other aggressive deeds by modern Muslims...

Earlier I mentioned the high tempo of immigration from Central Asian states to Russian Far East; 95% of migrants are Muslims. Add to this figure the tens of thousands of ethnic 'Russian' Muslims, mostly from North Caucasus who live in the Far East. It is possible that in 5 – 10 years from now Muslims will become a dominant population group here.

The spread of Islam is not a pure domestic problem of Russia. In China the activities of radical *Uigur* Muslims who are very close to Central Asia have been regarded as serious threat to national security. In Japan there is a relatively small number of Muslims (100 – 150 thousands people) but the criminal rate among them is disproportionately high. Ethnic Russian Muslims were trying to buy property in Southern Kurile islands in 1990th – they probably hoped to get the Japanese citizenship. Many Iranians and Afghans tried to illegally migrate to Japan by ships departing from Vladivostok and other Russian seaports. And of course we should not forget about *Al-Kayida*, *Jemaah Islamiya*, *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* and others.

My final comments will address the 'outside' factors and tendencies potentially influencing NE Asia security environment. The most important one is the Tunisian revolution⁶. A lot is said and written about it; much more will be said later. I'd like to draw your attention to only one aspect of this dramatic event – its total suddenness and seeming illogicality.

Last August I went for vacation in Tunisia with my family. We got to love this country. Good infrastructure, almost no signs of poverty, dynamic housing construction, friendly people with obvious traces of French influence in their mentality. Tunisia was maybe the most advanced of all African nations, both economically and socially. Occasional portraits of president Ben Ali on the walls, but not too many. And there was only one minor incident we witnessed. A man in the supermarket suddenly burst into

5 There is no clerical hierarchy in Islam; any man after making a '*hajj*' can declare himself '*imam*' and start preaching. Accordingly, there is no universal authority for Muslims like the Pope or Dalai-lama.

6 Again, the text of presentation dates back to February, 2011 – well before Egypt, Libya, Yemeni and Syria events. The author decided to keep the original text unedited.

anger, started crying and crashing shelves with food. The security personnel quickly detained him and took out. We were told not to worry, “it happens – in *Ramadan* many people feel uneasy and behave strangely”.

Then came the December when the first uprising started in Tunisia. In January the amiable President hurriedly left his country. To his honor the former President did not order the troops to fire at protesters. And I have recalled that man in the supermarket. His internal discomfort and tension splashed accidentally; in reality it was not an accident. It was a state of discomfort, dissatisfaction and anger that drew tens of thousands of Tunisians to the streets.

And I recalled one more episode of my life. In September 1993 I was in Moscow with my little son, again on vacation. After visiting the Zoo we happened to come to the street Beer Festival right near the corner of the House of Parliament. Czech beer was excellent, weather bright and people around smiling and peaceful. Less than a month later T-90 tanks started to fire shells to the Parliament of Russian Federation and CNN TV crews translated this horror to the rest of the world..

In conclusion I want to express concern. We should not overestimate the level of stability and security in our region. We know a lot how to deal with international conflicts, how to reach trade-offs in business, how to fight pandemic diseases. But we still have a lot to learn how to manage human societies, how to prevent the accumulation of tension and discomfort inside our compatriots. North Korea for sure, China, Mongolia, Russia, South Korea – they all are vulnerable. By the way, and Japan too – why do the Japanese movies show so many blood, violence and disturbed consciousness? Isn't it a witness of the suppressed mentality, too?

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