

The Balance of Power in Korea, and Japan*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine East Asia, particularly the situation surrounding North Korea, from the perspective of power politics. It specifically points out that a balance of power, the key concept in power politics, is an order that does not simply arise from maintaining a balance in military power but is in fact premised on a shared recognition among countries of “national interests” and “systemic interests”. It goes on to contrast the case of Europe, where the presence of these factors enabled power politics to take root, with the current situation in East Asia, which lacks these factors despite the seeming emergence of power politics in the region. The paper then explains the need for Japan – which at one point acted as if it had quickly mastered the balance of power, leading to misjudgments that culminated in tragedy – to consciously think and behave as a key actor in ways distinct from the past in forming a regional order encompassing the Korean peninsula.

2018 marks 150 years since the Meiji Restoration: a period that at once may appear to be a long time, and yet also prompts the thought: has it only been that long? Modern Japan's history is surprisingly short. Despite the shortness of its history, however, modern Japan's diplomacy has been full of incident and turmoil, particularly in the prewar years. Japan was the first non-European country to enter the European international order under its own steam and join the great powers in their struggle for power and interests in East Asia. In the years immediately following the Meiji Restoration, Japan sent a military expedition into Taiwan, followed by the Sino-Japanese War, signed the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, was victorious in the Russo-Japanese War, concluded the agreements with France and Russia, and annexed Korea. The year after the outbreak of World War I, Japan issued the so-called Twenty-One Demands to China, insisting on its interests in Shandong and Southern Manchuria. In this way, Japan transformed itself into an empire with remarkable speed.

In the 1920s, Japan joined the League of Nations, established under the new ideal of collective security, as a permanent member of its executive council, and became part of the Washington order by signing the Washington Naval Treaty, marking Japan's arrival as one of the major powers of the international order. Ironically, however, World War I shattered the balance of power that had been the foundation of that international order. The Russian Revolution took place during the war, and the alliance with Britain and the agreements with France and Russia that had formed the backbone of Japan's diplomacy were fatally undermined. Despite forming part of the core of the international order and despite seeming at first glance to have built a stable international position for itself, Japan's diplomatic isolation had already begun at this time, as Paul Claudel, the French ambassador to Japan, remarked. In the years that followed, having boxed itself into an impossible position, Japan launched itself into a war with the United States that led to the collapse and

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destruction of its empire.¹

After World War II, Japan seemed to reverse course and turn its back on power politics. Certainly, the logic of the US-Japan Security Treaty system is closer to “bandwagoning” than a balance of power, and many overseas specialists on international politics regard Japan’s postwar diplomacy as a strategy of “hiding” in the shadow of the American superpower. For this reason, they do not regard Japan as a major power. Even though Japan may be a member of the G7, for example, Japan is not in charge of determining its own national security policy, and is therefore regarded as a country that cannot achieve national security through its own power.

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Since the end of the Cold War, the focus of international politics has shifted from Europe to East Asia. The reasons for this shift include the rapid emergence of Chinese power, North Korea’s missile and nuclear development programs, together with the decline of Japanese influence and failing trust in US foreign policy. The centenary of the outbreak of World War I four years ago prompted some international relations theorists to predict a war between the United States and China by way of analogy with World War I. Some drew on the “Thucydides Trap” to compare the clash between the United States and China to the wars between Athens and Sparta. These arguments were based on a distorted understanding of the historical facts², but one thing had in common is that they all recognized the emergence of power politics in East Asia. Compared to Europe, however, East Asia does not have the same diplomatic norms, systems, or, most importantly, experience necessary for managing power politics in a prudent and cautious manner.

Various things have the potential to control power: ethics, norms, public opinion, and democratic systems. But ultimately what controls power is power itself. Hans J. Morgenthau wrote that the pursuit of power by states inevitably produces a balance of power.³ Some may object that the debate has moved on since Morgenthau’s time, but Kenneth N. Waltz also argued that a balance of power is the only logic of international politics. Setting aside for now the question of whether it is indeed the *only* logic, both these thinkers pointed out that when the balance of power functioned, Europe was at peace (under the Vienna system), while war broke out when it failed to function (World War I). Morgenthau argued that a balance of power inevitably results, and Waltz also thought that a balance of power produced itself naturally. But in fact, a balance of power does not simply happen: it is created. To create an international order (a pattern of behavior among states for maintaining basic objectives), requires ideals, rules, and frameworks. In modern Europe, those roles have been played by the balance of power. A balance of power does not mean weighing the military might of various countries on a set of virtual scales and achieving balance in that way. It means a series of negotiations and systems to determine who can do what, and how far they can go.⁴ Accordingly, for a balance of power to function, states must not only know the meaning of their own national interests, but must also understand the

¹ The question why Japan became an empire and then collapsed is a major subject in international studies. Important works have been done by Jack Snyder and Charles A. Kupchan, among others, who argue that the interests Japan gained from its empire in terms of diplomacy, national security, and economy did not match the costs.

² See, for example, Chapters 7 and 8 of Richard N. Rosecrance and Steven E. Miller eds., *The Next Great War? The Roots of World War I and the Risk of U.S.-China Conflict*, The MIT Press, 2015.

³ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, (Vol. 2), Japanese translation *Kokusai seiji – kenryoku to heiwa* by Yoshihisa Hara, Iwanami Bunko, 2013, p. 16

⁴ Tsuchiyama Jitsuo, *Anzen hoshō no kokusai seiji-gaku: aseri to ogori* (International Politics of Security: Anxiety and Hubris) 2nd. ed., Yūhikaku, 2014, Chapter 11, “Balance of Power: *Kokusai chitsujo keisei to iji no jōken*.”

interest to be gained from maintaining the international order, or what might be called systemic interests. This requires not only shared common thinking and shared understanding of history among the countries involved in the relationship, but also practice and experience at managing international relations. The existence of a balance of power was a precondition for the formation of the European order that developed into an international system as the European powers expanded their power around the world in the nineteenth century; this is the international order that we know today.

The extent to which countries outside Europe have adopted the European thinking on international relations varies from one country and region to another, but probably nowhere has learned the lessons as keenly as Japan after the arrival of Perry's fleet. The story of Sakamoto Ryōma carrying a book of international law in his pocket may be apocryphal, but it vividly illustrates the attitude of Japan to the outside world in the waning days of the Tokugawa shogunate. Government (*bakufu*) officials closely followed developments in neighboring Qing China, which had suffered defeat in the two Opium Wars, and in Russia, which had been defeated in the Crimean War. From an early stage, Katsu Kaishū predicted that the present system of government could not hold, while Hashimoto Sanai, right-hand man of Matsudaira Yoshinaga, head of Fukui domain in Echizen province, came up with a proposal for a unified state to take the place of the feudal system. That the *baku-han* (Tokugawa Shogunate) system successfully opened the country and implemented the Meiji Restoration less than 20 years after the arrival of Perry's ships was thanks to the ability of the so-called enlightenment faction of *bakufu* officials like Kawaji Toshiakira and Iwase Tadanari, and the heads of powerful domains like Shimazu Nariakira and Matsudaira Yoshinaga to read one step ahead and see how events were developing. They possessed realism—the ability to see what they could do based on their power, interests, and the strength of their support, and to understand how long they could hold on. This enabled them to calculate their strength, formulate a policy, and produce the desired results.

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What can a balance-of-power perspective tell us about North Korea's nuclear and missile development programs, which currently threaten the East Asian and US security system? On the balance of power and its relationship to small and medium-sized countries, Morgenthau wrote that the only options for a small country were to adjust to the balance of power or to get on the bandwagon of the dominance of a major power, citing Korea as an example. For more than 2000 years, Korea's destiny has been determined either by the dominance of a country that controlled Korea or by a balance of power among countries competing for control.⁵ There is no question that Morgenthau's arguments match the reality of countries like Poland, the Baltic states, or Vietnam, which have frequently fallen victim to the great powers, or to the leaders of Japan in the *bakumatsu* (last days of Tokugawa shogunate) era and the Meiji Restoration, who feared an invasion by the European powers. For example, when Russia harbored its warship *Posadnik* in Tsushima and looked to occupy the island, Katsu Kaishū used British power to drive Russia away. After the Restoration, the Meiji government, having dispatched troops to Taiwan and Korea, knew that Japan was not strong enough to match the powers, and sought instead to let the powers compete among themselves and looked to profit in that way. The balance of power in Asia between Britain, France, and Russia worked as a positive advantage for the opening and independence of Japan as a small country. It would probably be an exaggeration to say that *bakumatsu* and early Meiji Japan carried out balance of power diplomacy with the powers. Japan at the time did not have a Metternich or Bismarck, and there was no system or history of any

⁵ Morgenthau, op cit., p. 34

balance of power existed in Asia at the time. And although foreign policy decisions taken by the early Meiji government—the expedition to Taiwan, the Ganghwa Island incident, and ultimately the Sino-Japanese War—seem to be connected in retrospect, there was no grand design that envisaged taking these actions from the outset. Saigō Takamori's advocacy of a punitive mission against Korea (*Seikanron*) was not a strategic argument, and Yamagata Aritomo's "line of interest," learned from Lorenz von Stein, also looks like an after-the-fact argument to provide a justification for Japan's decision to send troops into Korea.

Despite these various qualifications, however, it remains true that Japan was the sole actor who understood the balance of power in East Asia, especially as it pertained to Korea. This diplomatic sense was something possessed by Katsu Kaishū, by Itō Hirobumi in Meiji, and by Fukuzawa Yukichi outside the government. Of course, Mutsu Munemitsu, a realist who was Japan's foreign minister during the Sino-Japanese War, had it too. Not that Mutsu saw everything clearly. The biggest setback of Mutsu's diplomatic career was the Triple Intervention; the reason for this failure was a mistaken judgement of how much Japan could do—that is to say, a mistaken understanding about the balance of power. In his diplomatic memoirs *Kenkenroku*, Mutsu famously wrote "I should like to think that there was no other option," but if Japan had not demanded that China cede the Liaodong Peninsula in the treaty of Shimonoseki (peace treaty of the First Sino-Japanese War), it is conceivable that the vicious circle that later embroiled East Asia might never have started. Japan's greed and fear of Russia led to the demand for Liaodong Peninsula, and invited the Triple Intervention. But when Japan compromised and returned the peninsula to Qing China, Russia started to extend its own power into the peninsula. Japan chose the Anglo-Japanese Alliance over the Russo-Japanese agreement, leading to the Russo-Japanese War and the annexation of Korea.

As Sarah C. Paine of the US Naval War College has written, one can see diplomacy in East Asia in the period from the Sino-Japanese War to World War I as the history of the successes and failures of Japan's balance of power diplomacy, with the focus always on Korea.⁶ As already noted, however, this balance of power diplomacy was no longer functioning by the 1920s. The next twenty years one bad decision led to another. After the Manchuria incident, Japan reacted to criticism from the international community by quitting the League of Nations, then entered all-out war with China following the Marco Polo Bridge incident. Isolated and without support, Japan was driven to sign an alliance with Nazi Germany; when Germany declared war on the Soviet Union, Japan seized the opportunity to "advance south," prompting the United States to impose economic sanctions. Japan responded by planning a sudden attack on Pearl Harbor and war with the United States, with tragic consequences.

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There is a view that the collapse of the Japanese empire, rather than stabilizing the balance of power on the Korean peninsula, actually destroyed that balance of power, leading to the Korean War that broke out five years later. The following year, Japan signed the US-Japan Security Treaty, meaning that postwar Japan remained committed to the balance of power in Korea, albeit in a different form from before the war. This is clear from an exchange of notes regarding UN command in the first US-Japan Security Treaty, the secret Korean minutes acknowledged at the time of the revision of the Security Treaty in 1960, the secret agreement on nuclear weapons made at the US-Japan summit meeting in 1969, and in the guidelines for US-Japan defense cooperation, among other things. There is an argument that the Yoshida Doctrine symbolizes

⁶ Sarah C. M. Paine, *The Japanese Empire: Grand Strategy from the Meiji Restoration to the Pacific War*, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

postwar Japan's retreat from power politics, but this argument neglects the reality that the burden of supporting the peace and security of postwar Japan has been borne by places like Korea and Okinawa. The focus of the negotiations leading up to the Agreed Framework in 1994 and the Six Party Talks that followed, and of all subsequent policies on North Korea, including the current economic sanctions, has been to balance the risks and interests of the countries neighboring the North, and to find a way to bring North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile development programs to an end.⁷ The essential thing is to ensure that North Korea does not miscalculate that it can use the threat of the possibility of a nuclear attack by ballistic missiles to achieve its strategic objectives.

⁷ Joel S. Wit, Daniel B. Poneman, and Robert L. Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis*, The Brooking Institution, 2004, is helpful in knowing the efforts of the Clinton administration to respond to the situation.