



KIM HAK-JOON

President of the Northeast Asian History Foundation; Chairman of the Asia Journalist Association, Republic of Korea

KIM Hak-Joon, President of the Northeast Asian History Foundation; Chairman of the Asia Journalist Association, Republic of Korea

Let me start with current political features of Northeast Asia. It is the one and only sub-region where the world's four major powers, that is, the US, Japan, China and Russia, can easily meet and interact and their respective interests compete. Northeast Asia is also the region of the world's heaviest concentration of military capabilities, with the three largest nuclear states, that is, the US, China and Russia, and one semi-nuclear state, Japan, demonstrating their respective military strengths in this highly-contested strategic crossroads.

Northeast Asia is also characterised by the following two points. It has the world's largest concentration of divided polities, China and Korea, the two most prominent potential flashpoints. Secondly, the presence of the two biggest semi-enclosed seas has caused serious maritime disputes, including territorial ones. Taking both of these geopolitical futures of Northeast Asia, let us review recent security trends in this region which show a mixture of positive and negative elements.

What are the positive elements? They are increasing economic interaction, as well as independence and partnership for specific interests and issues. Concretely speaking, we now witness rapidly expanding trade between China, Japan and Korea, and in parallel with this trend, the level of economic integration among these three countries continues to grow. We also see active negotiations on the FTA at the same time, and collaboration on ecological problems as well as counter-terrorism. Multilateral conferences at the highest political level are also held frequently at the ASEAN Plus Three summit, the East Asia Summit, EAS, and the China, Japan and Korea trilateral summit.

However, on the other hands, there exist negative elements as well that present a wide range of security challenges. We may say that all is not quiet on the eastern front, and let me suggest five examples in this area. Firstly, competition and rivalry between China, Japan and others over regional political influence has become salient since China's surpassing Japan in GDP in 2010. Secondly, there are continuing disputes over maritime territory, including territorial disputes over small islands, maritime delimitation between adjacent and/or opposite coastal states, and allocation of marine resources. Recently, China and the US have suggested different interpretations under the UNCLOS to regulate the activities of foreign military forces in the EEZ, thereby producing other kinds of maritime disputes. Let me add other types of emerging dispute at this point. One is the installation of the safety zone announced by China in the name of the Air Defence Identification Zone, ADIZ. The other is island reclamations in the South China Sea; this has raised the serious issue of the freedom of navigation.

The third is the lingering of past history and the rise of nationalism, as evidenced by historical distortion by China and Japan. The Northeast Asia History Project, in the case of China, has incorporated the ancient period of Korean history, including Goguryeo history, into Chinese history, thereby igniting strong resentment in Koreans towards China. Japan has gone one step further by attempting the distortion and revision of World War Two history. Japan's unreasonable claim over Dokdo Island, which belongs to the territory of Korea, has infuriated Koreans. Indeed, this island in the East Sea has been part of Korea's inherent territory for many centuries.

More serious is the undeniable fact that through the revision of laws Japan has become the country that can execute a war; at present, the Abe administration is even attempting to abrogate the peace clause of the Japanese Constitution which prohibits Japan from doing so. A series of moves by Japan to a war footing under the blessing of the Obama administration have become a source of fear and mistrust among not only Northeast Asian countries but also Southeast Asian countries. China has spearheaded the alarmist movement against Japan's bold moves, which may be interpreted as the resurrection of militarism.



Let me recall at this point an article published in 2013 in the quarterly *Global Asia*. This article warned that security in Northeast Asia today is like a pressure cooker filled with steam. A pressure cooker has a critical part called a steam valve that allows excess pressure to be released to prevent the appliance from exploding. The writer stresses in this analysis that efforts have to be made to avoid an explosion, and indeed, there is growing appreciation of the security challenges confronting the region. Many experts have pointed out the inadequacy of existing institutions to address the various challenges effectively, arguing that the current network of multilateral institutions is only a loose notion of a security architecture. We should find a new road to security cooperation in Northeast Asia against this background. The Republic of Korea's proposal in November 2013 on the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative, NAPCI, merits serious consideration.