

EAST ASIA IN THE WORLD POLITICS IN THE 20th CENTURY

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The 20th century has passed by into the shadow of the past; however the century has left memorable imprints with extraordinary progresses, wonderful achievements, great changes and even surprising overturns. In that great century, East Asia has made its presence in many aspects and dimensions. This short article only looks at East Asia from the angle of its relation to the world politics of the 20th century. From this angle, East Asia is recognized as a geo-political region including North-East Asia and South-East Asia, despite the fact that the concept of East Asia is still controversial when considered from different regional criteria such as geo-culture, geo-historical culture... [1].

1. In retrospect, many East Asian countries had exchanges with other regions in the world via ways such as the famous "silk road" and in the 13th century via the Mongolian horse steps which made a terror shake to all Europe.

However after the great geographical discoveries in late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, especially after capitalism was established on the global scale, East Asian countries were driven by world politico-economic engine,

becoming the conquered targets of the world capitalism. Capitalism kept "throwing net" around the world especially from the later half of nineteenth century when it developed into imperialism with the domination of monopoly capitalists. In the imperialist wars in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries most of countries being the subjects of dispute to redistribute among the capitalist powers are in the East Asia area such as Korea, the Philippines, and parts of the huge but already weakened Empire of China. As an unavoidable consequence, most of East Asian countries were colonized or semi-colonized by western imperialist countries, which were ruling the world politics. That was due to the consequences of the "backwardness and stagnancy" in development meanwhile western world had advanced to capitalism and started their industrialization [1].

In East Asia, Japan was the only exception of not being dominated by western countries. With the Meiji Restoration (1868), the country could maintain its national independence and progressed to a capitalist power. Moreover, it joined other world powers to

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redistribute the world markets and establish the world order in the Far East- Pacific area. Though it was still under pressure and was not considered to be in the "world power club" by those countries, Japan was the only "representative" in Asia together with other world powers establishing the world political institution in the first half of twentieth century.

On the other side of politics, East Asian colonized countries did not endure the enslavement of foreign colonizer. They rose to struggle for liberation contributing to "Eastern awakening" as stated by Lenin. Though Eastern nations followed different ideologies, the struggle for national liberation dealt a heavy blow on the imperialist colonial system, waking up the national awareness and encouraging the struggling movement of oppressed nations all over the world. When the Second World War ended, East Asia became the vanguard of liberation movement in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The national liberation movement overturned the colonial system and led to the establishment of young independent countries creating new appearance of world politics and especially East Asia in the late twentieth century.

2. The Second World War ended, the world history turned to a new chapter. A new world order was established, as a result, a new world politics was formed with its own distinctive features which

existed in almost the second half of the 20th century.

That is the division of influential areas among war triumph countries mainly between Soviet Union and the USA.

The world was almost divided into two halves with the formation of two blocs – 2 social systems: capitalist and socialist. That was the first ever-seen phenomenon in the world history.

As a consequence, the two systems: capitalist and socialist, could not avoid confrontation the culmination of which was the "Cold War". The world was almost at the chasm of war sometimes.

After the Second War World, East Asia was in the overall political situation; however, it had its own differences creating the "diversity" of the history in the second half of 20th century.

First, with the influential division between two super powers Yalta's agreements (Feb-1945), the situation in East Asia was not similar to that in Europe. In Europe, there was a clear distinction between two poles – Eastern Europe which was under Soviet's influence, Western Europe which was under USA's influence. However, in East Asia the real situation was not completely the same as the Yalta's agreements. South East Asian countries rose to struggle for independence. They did not accept to be "under the traditional influence of western

imperialist countries" and they won. China also did not accept to be the "buffer zone" between the two super powers with the coalition government of Nationalist-Communist parties which were, by nature, the arched enemies. The Yalta agreements on China were soon broken with the victory of the Chinese revolution and the foundation of People's Republic of China (Oct, 1949). In East Asia, Korea was probably the typical country which was under the polarization influence lasted until today. The defeated Japan had no choice except for accepting all decisions made in the Potsdam Conference in July 1945.

It is possible to say that, except for Europe, the continent having most of powerful countries (later the USA joined this group), East Asia (and Asia) was the area suffering more from the order of Versailles - Washington and Yalta polarization than other continents such as Africa, Australia, and America. East Asia related closely to the changes of the world politics.

With the formation of the 2 poles: capitalist and socialist, East Asian countries split into different political ways. Some countries had close coalition with western countries and followed capitalism; some others became members of the socialist community and developed towards socialism. That difference in some cases was due to the external intervention of some super powers. East Asian countries had many

connections with super powers especially the USA and the former USSR.

As an inevitable consequence, there were a lot of wars in East Asia. During 4 decades after the Second World War, the gunfire was almost non-stop in the region. East Asia became the battle of the Cold War and together with Europe it was the center of East-West confrontation. The Vietnam War was the biggest "local war" between the 2 sides. East Asian countries had to suffer serious consequences of the "Cold War" as well as "hot wars". As a consequence, hostilities, distrust and suspicion have lasted in decades and until now they still exist.

There was another tendency in the world politics; that is, though the two super powers tried to attract other countries to follow, most of Asian countries, Africa and Latin America did not directly follow any side. They tended to be neutral. They did not want to be driven in the conflicts of the super powers. Non-aligned movement was a representative of that peace and neutral trend. The Republic of Indonesia under Sukarno was one of founding members from Bandung Conference in 1955 to Nonaligned Movement in 1961. Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam have been active members since the Bandung Conference.

Apart from their prominence in the political arena of the world, East Asian countries and territories were also

distinguished with the impressive economic growth. That is "*Japan miracle*" - the country rose from a ruined and devastated state to the second economic super power; South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore - the dragons took off and succeeded after 30 years; the vast and crowded China with continuous significant growth rate; and ASEAN - the most regional alliance of developing countries. East Asia is seen as "*a flying crane flock*" of which Japan is the head. It is considered that "*the 21st century is the century of Asia*" [2, p.208], in which East Asia plays the leading role.

3. In the early 1990s, after the end of the Cold War and the two-pole order, the world politics has changed significantly. A new world order is coming into being. It is expected that the order would be multi-polar and multi-centered.

East Asia is in the same trend. It is facing various current challenges and opportunities. East Asian countries, like other countries in the world, are trying to readjust their strategies and solve their confusions and conflicts to create an essential peace environment.

Currently, some most significant factors in the region are:

Japan is trying to be the political power to keep pace with its current economic power position. Japan is trying to be a pole in the multi-polar world and the engine to lead the regional

economies although there will be a lot of difficulties ahead.

Second, with its military and economic powers, "China is a notable power in East Asia. China is distinguished for its geo-political position. China's military and economic powers have made its neighboring countries find themselves smaller, except for India. That's why, naturally China could affirm their position in the region fitting to the demand of their history, geography and economy" [4, p.190]. Recently, French president, Jacques Chirac said "the world is no longer single polar. In 50 years, China will be a super power and international situation will change spectacularly" [3]. Many people share the French president's idea, especially, at present, the USA is presumptuous in their actions including military attacks presuming it is the only pole in the world and the world now is mono-polar. However, in East Asia, it is impossible to ignore the China factor because except for the relations of USA - China - Japan or USA - China - Russia, etc., the relation of China - USA has the controlling role in the region.

Third, the existence in over one third century of ASEAN, the South-East Asian regional alliance, has shown its dynamic role. It is increasingly widening its relations especially with North East Asia countries. With the initiative of Malaysia (Dec-1997), ASEAN plus 3 (China - Japan - South Korea) has

become a new and special form of co-operation, typical in the relations among East Asia. Though there are a lot of differences and difficulties, a new co-operation form has been established among the East Asian countries. The co-operation is shown in security and economy with promising progress and result.

However, East Asia, after the Cold War, has been in confusion of challenges, threats and "hot places" in the regional political map. Those are the complicated situation in Korea and Taiwan; the land, island and sea territory conflicts in Senkuka between China and Japan, in Kuril Islands between Japan and Russia and in Spratlys - in many regional countries; the booming of separatist and terrorist movements in the Philippines, Indonesia etc. Those conflicts and

disputes are difficult to solve for they have historical roots. They are potential threats to the security, stability and co-operation of each country and the whole region. There are also external factors from outside world affecting the region.

East Asia has entered the 21st century. Having experienced challenges and having their own style of behaviors originated from the long culture, East Asian countries have many common values. They keep rising and co-operating to develop an "open regionalism" (in terms of economy) and flexible policy (in terms of security co-operation) (Ahn Byung Joon). Those features facilitate East Asia to be an important center for economy and politics with the aim to build a peaceful, stable, co-operative and prosperous world.

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