

# The Shifting Power Structure of Northeast Asia and China's Strategic Choices in the 2020s

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<https://doi.org/10.46272/2587-8476-2020-11-2-45-67>

## ABSTRACT

The Northeast Asian (NEA) power structure demonstrates a weakening unipolarity of the United States (U.S.), which will evolve into a power structure with “multilateral co-opetition of two superpowers (China and the U.S.) and three regional great powers (Russia, Japan, and South Korea)” during the 2020s. In the context of this shifting power structure, the other five NEA states will adjust their diplomatic policies. Japan, Russia, and South Korea, which occupy the second tier of the NEA power structure, will pursue regional great power diplomacy and regional interests. Russia will maintain a careful balance with China and the U.S., and will use investments from the other NEA states pragmatically to develop its Far East region. Japan will seek to maximize its security guarantees from the U.S. while actively obtaining economic benefits from China, and will try to remain flexible in terms of its NEA strategic choice. South Korea will implement the so-called “two superpowers diplomacy” in relation to the U.S. and China in order to enhance its strategic autonomy. With relatively weak national power, North Korea and Mongolia occupy the third tier of the NEA power structure, and they will try to ensure the survival of their respective regimes and promote national security. China's strategic choices for NEA in the next decade are likely to include five aspects: 1) to avoid a “new Cold War” and achieve a strategic balance with the U.S.; 2) to maintain friendly and close strategic ties with Russia; 3) to actively promote economic cooperation with the other NEA countries; 4) to promote the establishment of a regional security mechanism in the future that includes all the NEA states, for example, a “Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Organization” (NEAPCO); and 5) to construct a collective NEA identity.

## KEYWORDS

*Northeast Asia (NEA), power structure, China–U.S. strategic competition, strategic choices*

## Introduction

Northeast Asia (NEA), which stretches west into the heart of the Eurasian continent and borders the Arctic Ocean to the north and the Pacific Island chain to the east, includes Northeast China, Russia's Far East, and Eastern Siberia, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea, and Japan. Although the United States (U.S.) is not geographically located in NEA, it has significant influence in this region, so the authors also regard the U.S. as an NEA state.

NEA has always been known for its special political, economic, military, and cultural complexity. Politically, the capitalist systems of the U.S., Japan, and the Republic of Korea (South Korea, ROK) and the socialist systems of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea, DPRK) coexist here. Economically, the region includes developed economies such as the U.S., Japan, and South Korea, emerging economies such as China and Russia, and North Korea, an undeveloped country. Militarily, China, the U.S., Russia are major nuclear powers, Japan has a strong navy, and North Korea claims to have nuclear power. Culturally, Confucianism, Orthodox Christianity, and Christianity collide and integrate here. The high degree of complexity has led to a number of paradoxical characteristics within the NEA region: for example, there is great room for development in terms of regional integration, but advances in this direction are difficult to achieve; the peoples of the region's countries feel a deep connection with each other, yet there is a lack of mutual trust; and the long-standing regional security issues are exacerbated by the lack of regional security mechanisms.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the Cold War, the power structure in NEA was "one superpower (U.S.) dominates, and three regional great powers (Russia, China, and Japan) coexist." Since the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century, the national power comparison of the NEA states has begun to show characteristics of the weakening unipolarity of the U.S. This unipolarity will continue to weaken in the 2020s and will evolve into a power structure with two superpowers and three regional great powers.

The concept of "power structure" in this article can be defined as the balance of comprehensive national power among the seven NEA states. Comprehensive national power is measured by the following four indicators: population, economy, technology, and military. Population, the first indicator, is assessed based on population data of the seven NEA states, with the data taken from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).<sup>2</sup> Economy, the second indicator, is estimated using the GDP of the seven NEA states (data sources are the International Monetary Fund (IMF),<sup>3</sup> the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA),<sup>4</sup> and the *Database of International Futures*).<sup>5</sup> Technology, the third indicator, is measured

1 *Security Cooperation Mechanism in Northeast Asia* 2006, 4-6.

2 "World Population Prospects 2019," United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2019, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>.

3 "World Economic Outlook Database October 2019," IMF, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2019/02/weodata/index.aspx>.

4 "World Factbook," Central Intelligence Agency, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/>.

5 "Database of International Futures (IFs Version 7.53)," University of Denver, accessed September 13, 2020, [http://www.ifs.du.edu/ifs/frm\\_MainMenu.aspx](http://www.ifs.du.edu/ifs/frm_MainMenu.aspx).

by the GDP per capita of the seven NEA states, with the data taken from the IMF,<sup>1</sup> the CIA,<sup>2</sup> and the *Database of International Futures*.<sup>3</sup> Military, the fourth indicator, depends on the military expenditure of seven NEA states, with the data taken from the *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*,<sup>4</sup> the *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers* report,<sup>5</sup> and the *Database of International Futures*.<sup>6</sup>

In order to quantitatively measure the balance of comprehensive national power among the seven NEA states, the authors draw a “national power index of the NEA states” (see *Table 1*) model. The authors add the standardized values of the four indicators of “population numbers,” “GDP,” “GDP per capita,” and “military expenditure” and calculate the average in order to obtain the national power index of a state in a given year. The formula for comprehensive national power (percentage) is  $Power_t = (Pop_t + Eco_t + Tech_t + Milt) \div 4$ . The “t” in this formula is a time variable. The national power index of a state ranges from 0 to 1, representing the relative national power of a state among the seven NEA countries.

For example, the national power index of China in 1990 is 0.182 (see *Table 1*), which means China’s national power accounted for 18.2% of the total power of the seven NEA states. We arrived at the number 0.182, which represents national power index of China in 1990, by performing the following calculations. In 1990, China’s population was 1,176,884,000, which accounted for 0.666 of the total population of the seven NEA states (1,766,436,000). Its GDP was 398.62 billion USD (MER), which accounted for 0.039 of the total GDP of the seven NEA states (10332.45 billion USD, MER). China’s GDP per capita in 1990 was 338.7 USD, which amounted to 0.005 of the total GDP per capita of the seven NEA states (62258.3 USD). Its military expenditure was 10085.1 million USD, which equaled 0.017 of the military expenditure of the seven NEA states (580331.2 million USD). Using the formula,  $Power_t = (Pop_t + Eco_t + Tech_t + Milt) \div 4$ , the authors concluded that the national power index of China in 1990 was  $0.182 = (0.666 + 0.039 + 0.005 + 0.017) \div 4$ .

The following literature was used to help develop the “national power index of the NEA states” model. Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey put forward the Composite Indicator of National Capability (CINC) in 1972.<sup>7</sup> Cline attempted to calculate national power by assigning index numbers as follows: “critical mass” (population, land, and position); “economic capability” (e.g., GNP); “military capability” (e.g., military personnel and budget); “strategic purpose” (goals and objectives); and “will” (elite and popular support for purposes) in 1977.<sup>8</sup> Hu and Men summarized eight national strategic resources in 2002: economic resources, human capital, natural resources, capital resources, knowledge, and technical resources, government resources, military strength, and international resources.<sup>9</sup> Rogers et al. noted four functional “attributes”

1 “World Economic Outlook Database October 2019.”

2 “World Factbook.”

3 “Database of International Futures (IFs Version 7.53).”

4 “Trends in World Military Expenditure,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), accessed September 13, 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/SIPRI-Milex-data-1949-2019.xlsx>.

5 “World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 2019,” U.S. Department of State, December 2019, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/world-military-expenditures-and-arms-transfers-2019/>.

6 “Database of International Futures (IFs Version 7.53).”

7 Singer et al. 1972, 19–48.

8 Cline 1977.

9 Hu, Men 2002, 26–41.

to audit national geopolitical capability in 2019: “national base” (national wealth, population structure, national spread, and self-sufficiency); “national structure” (economic clout, technological prowess, and cultural prestige); “national instruments” (diplomatic leverage and military might); and “national resolve” (government efficacy, economic resolve, strategic resolve, and altruistic resolve).<sup>1</sup>

What are the aspects of the strategic competition between China and the U.S. in the NEA region? What foreign policy adjustments will the NEA states make in light of the intensified strategic competition between China and the U.S. and the evolution of power structure in NEA? What are China’s strategic choices for NEA in the next decade? This article will analyze the above three issues.

### NEA Will Evolve into a Power Structure with two Superpowers and three Regional Great Powers in the Next Decade

At the end of the Cold War, the NEA power structure was “one superpower dominates, and three regional great powers coexist.” In 1990, U.S. national power accounted for 40.7% of the total power of the seven NEA states, followed by Japan (20.7%), China (18.2%), Russia (then the Soviet Union, 14.2%), South Korea (4.4%), North Korea (1.2%) and Mongolia (0.6%) (see Table 1).

Table 1.

**NATIONAL POWER INDEX OF THE NEA STATES FROM 1990 TO 2030 (SELECTED YEARS)**  
**ИНДЕКС НАЦИОНАЛЬНОЙ МОЩИ ГОСУДАРСТВ СЕВЕРО-ВОСТОЧНОЙ АЗИИ**  
**С 1990 ПО 2030 г. (ПРИВЕДЕНЫ ИЗБРАННЫЕ ГОДА)**

Year	State	Population [1] Population numbers	Economy[2] GDP (percentage)	Technology GDP per capita (percentage)	Military [3] Military expenditure (percentage)	Comprehensive National Power (percentage)
1990	U.S.	0.142728	0.577126	0.3799	0.527578	0.406833
	China	0.666247	0.038579	0.00544	0.017378	0.181911
	Japan	0.070484	0.303202	0.404157	0.049628	0.206868
	Russia	0.083519	0.050018	0.056266	0.377567	0.141843
	S. Korea	0.024297	0.027934	0.108019	0.017422	0.044418
	N. Korea	0.011488	0.002837	0.023199	0.010236	0.01194
	Mongolia	0.001237	0.000303	0.023018	0.000191	0.006187
2000	U.S.	0.146809	0.595097	0.39979	0.757899	0.474899
	China	0.672548	0.07052	0.010342	0.057602	0.202753
	Japan	0.066457	0.283696	0.421025	0.114326	0.221376
	Russia	0.076296	0.016166	0.020897	0.023182	0.034135
	S. Korea	0.024691	0.033444	0.133593	0.03467	0.056599
	N. Korea	0.011949	0.001001	0.00826	0.012259	0.008367
	Mongolia	0.001249	0.000077	0.006094	0.000061	0.001871

1 James Rogers, “The Audit of Geopolitical Capability 2019,” Henry Jackson Society, January, 2019, accessed September 14, 2020, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/HJS-2019-Audit-of-Geopolitical-Capability-Report-web.pdf>.

Year	State	Population [1] Population numbers	Economy[2] GDP (percentage)	Technology GDP per capita (percentage)	Military [3] Military expenditure (percentage)	Comprehensive National Power (percentage)
2005	U.S.	0.149523	0.595977	0.403244	0.778945	0.481922
	China	0.674528	0.105548	0.015831	0.07106	0.216742
	Japan	0.065044	0.217396	0.338134	0.068556	0.172283
	Russia	0.072823	0.037444	0.052019	0.042304	0.051148
	S. Korea	0.024685	0.04274	0.175163	0.034292	0.06922
	N. Korea	0.012116	0.00078	0.006508	0.004797	0.00605
	Mongolia	0.001281	0.000115	0.009101	0.000046	0.002636
2010	U.S.	0.152473	0.50697	0.358047	0.728358	0.436462
	China	0.675403	0.205139	0.032707	0.120713	0.258491
	Japan	0.063426	0.192754	0.327258	0.057018	0.160114
	Russia	0.070796	0.055313	0.084134	0.061258	0.067876
	S. Korea	0.024447	0.038688	0.170412	0.029393	0.065735
	N. Korea	0.012113	0.000892	0.007933	0.003203	0.006035
	Mongolia	0.001342	0.000243	0.019509	0.000057	0.005288
2015	U.S.	0.154291	0.496572	0.399304	0.621366	0.417883
	China	0.676466	0.305881	0.056101	0.223166	0.315403
	Japan	0.06154	0.119601	0.241121	0.043891	0.116538
	Russia	0.069714	0.03697	0.065794	0.069233	0.060428
	S. Korea	0.024438	0.039938	0.202762	0.038121	0.076315
	N. Korea	0.012109	0.000719	0.007367	0.004117	0.006078
	Mongolia	0.001442	0.00032	0.02755	0.000106	0.007355
2020	U.S.	0.155908	0.44203	0.337454	0.54092	0.369078
	China	0.677947	0.319157	0.056032	0.274702	0.33196
	Japan	0.059573	0.151732	0.303153	0.058126	0.143146
	Russia	0.068738	0.050023	0.086617	0.08722	0.073149
	S. Korea	0.024149	0.036012	0.177494	0.034625	0.06807
	N. Korea	0.012142	0.000615	0.006031	0.004249	0.005759
	Mongolia	0.001544	0.000431	0.033219	0.000158	0.008838
2025	U.S.	0.158433	0.41382	0.325368	0.486296	0.345979
	China	0.678556	0.367409	0.067448	0.347707	0.36528
	Japan	0.057702	0.135212	0.291897	0.052748	0.13439
	Russia	0.067549	0.046694	0.08611	0.076359	0.069178
	S. Korea	0.023895	0.035833	0.1868	0.033041	0.069892
	N. Korea	0.012229	0.000549	0.005588	0.00365	0.005504
	Mongolia	0.001636	0.000483	0.036789	0.0002	0.009777
2030	U.S.	0.161901	0.374741	0.307335	0.434477	0.319614
	China	0.678059	0.428347	0.08388	0.415212	0.401374
	Japan	0.055917	0.119091	0.282792	0.047905	0.126426
	Russia	0.066377	0.042057	0.084131	0.066435	0.06475
	S. Korea	0.023686	0.03472	0.194636	0.032412	0.071363
	N. Korea	0.012341	0.000501	0.005395	0.003304	0.005385
	Mongolia	0.001721	0.000542	0.041831	0.000256	0.011088

**Sources:** [1] The source of population data for the seven NEA states is UN DESA. See: "World Population Prospects 2019." [2] The source of GDP data for the six NEA states minus North Korea is the IMF. See: "World Economic Outlook database October 2019." GDP data for North Korea is taken from the CIA. See: "World Factbook." The 2019–2030 GDP data for the seven

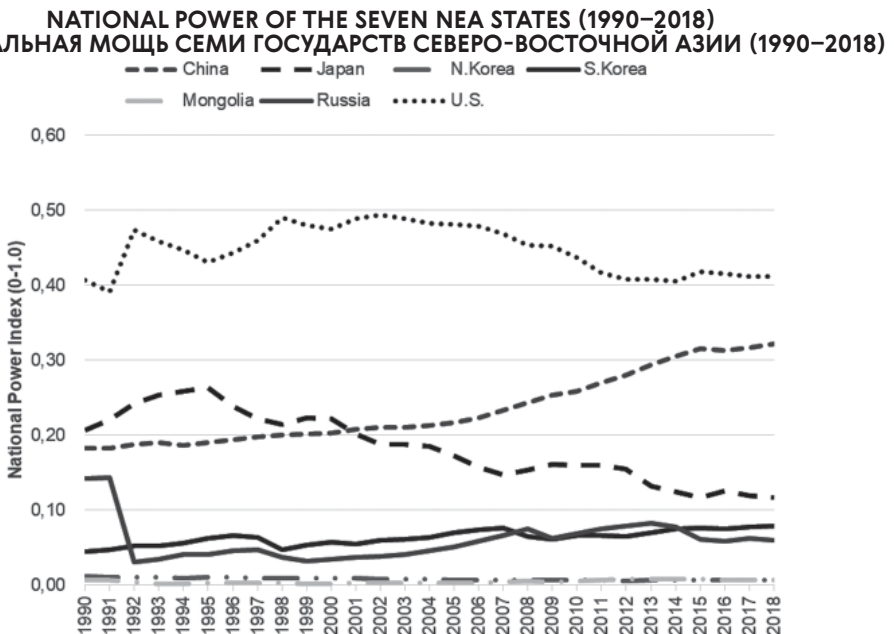
NEA states is taken from the University of Denver. See: "Database of International Futures (I.F.s Version 7.53)." [3] The source of military expenditure data for the seven NEA states is primarily SIPRI. See: "Trends in World Military Expenditure." Parts of the missing data are from U.S. Department of State. See: "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report," U.S. Department of Defense, June 1, 2019, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>. The 2019–2030 military expenditure data for the seven NEA states is taken from the University of Denver. See: "Database of International Futures (I.F.s Version 7.53)."

In the 2000s, the national power comparison of the seven NEA states demonstrated a weakening unipolarity of the U.S. After peaking at 49.4% in 2002, the proportion of U.S. national power in seven NEA states declined to 41.2% in 2018. Meanwhile, the proportion of China's national power in the seven NEA states increased from 20.3% in 2000 to 32.2% in 2018. Before the turn of the century, the gap between China and the U.S. in terms of relative national power was large, with China never reaching half of the relative national power of the U.S. However, China's rapid economic growth and increased military spending since the 2000s has meant that the gap between its relative national power and that of the U.S. has been gradually narrowing.

In 1995, Japan's national power accounted for 26.4% of the total power of the seven NEA states, but this proportion dropped to 11.6% in 2018. Russia's national power in NEA dropped significantly in the initial days following the collapse of the Soviet Union, from 14.2% in 1990 to 3.0% in 1992. After 1992, Russia's national power began to recover slowly. From 2000 to 2018, its national power increased slightly, but has never exceeded 10% of the total national power of the seven NEA states.

The relative national power of South Korea increased steadily from 1990 to 2018, with its share in the seven NEA states increasing from 4.4% in 1990 to 7.8% in 2018. North Korea's national power is relatively weak, and its relative national power decreased from 1.2% in 1990 to 0.6% in 2018. Mongolia's national power is also relatively weak. From 1990 to 2018, its national power accounted for 0.2% to 0.8% of the seven NEA states (see *Table and Figure 1*).

*Figure 1.*



Sources: Ibid.

The data in *Table 1* and *Figure 1* shows that China is rapidly approaching the U.S. in terms of national power. The original U.S. “one superpower” structure in the NEA region is changing. It was around the year 2000 that China’s national power surpassed that of Japan, after which the national power gap between the two countries gradually widened, with Japan falling into the second tier in the NEA power structure. Although Russia’s relative national power increased slightly from 1992 to 2018, it is still a long way behind China, and the U.S. South Korea’s national power increased significantly from 1990 to 2018, and it has become a second-tier regional middle power. North Korea and Mongolia belong in the third tier of the NEA power structure due to their underdeveloped economies and weak national strength (see *Table 2*).

*Table 2.*

**RANK OF SEVEN NEA STATES’ NATIONAL POWER IN 2018**  
**РЕЙТИНГ СЕМИ ГОСУДАРСТВ СЕВЕРО-ВОСТОЧНОЙ АЗИИ В 2018 г.**

	<b>Tier</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Proportion</b>
First tier	superpower	U.S.	41.2%
	quasi-superpower	China	32.2%
Second tier	regional great power	Japan	11.6%
	regional great power	Russia	5.9%
	regional middle power	South Korea	7.8%
Third tier	regional small power	North Korea	0.6%
		Mongolia	0.7%

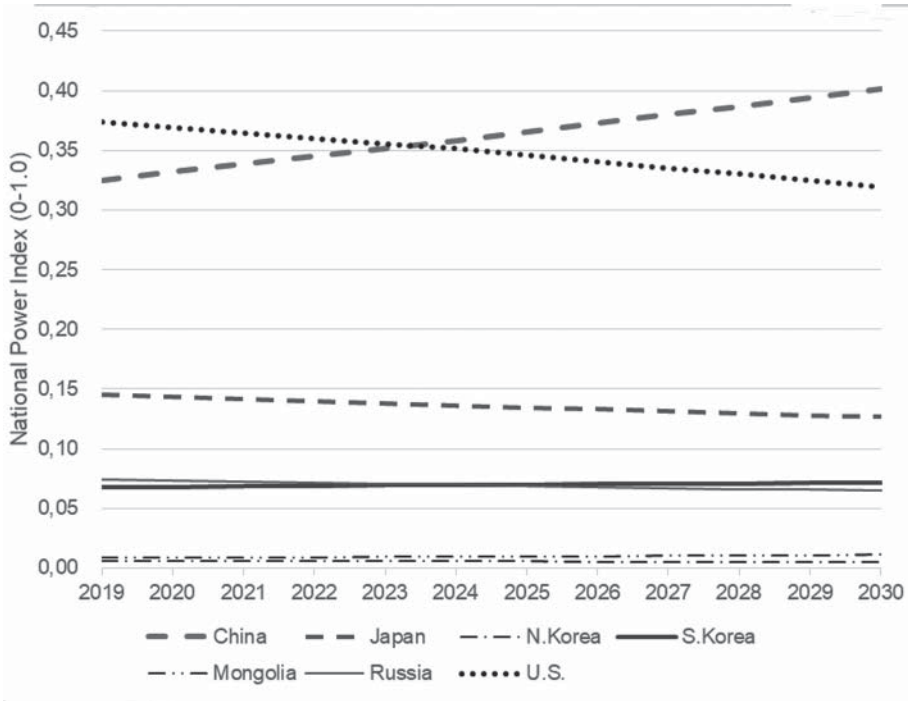
**Sources:** Ibid.

According to the predictive analysis in *Figure 2*, the national power comparison of the seven NEA states will continue the previous “weakening of U.S. unipolarity” process in the 2020s. From 2020 to 2030, China and the U.S. will continue to occupy the first tier of the NEA power structure. The relative national power of the U.S. is expected to decline from 36.9% in 2020 to 32.0% in 2030, while that of China will grow from 33.2% in 2020 to 40.1% in 2030. According to forecasts, China will reach the same national power level as the U.S. around 2024. From 2020 to 2030, Russia, Japan and South Korea will occupy the second tier, with Russia’s relative share in seven NEA states projected to be between 6% and 7%, Japan’s between 12% and 14%, and South Korea’s around 7%. North Korea and Mongolia will be in the third tier of the NEA power structure, with North Korea’s relative share of national power in the seven NEA states expected to be between 0.5% and 0.6%, while Mongolia’s will be between 0.9% and 1.1% (see *Figure 2* and *Tables 1* and *3*). By 2024, China and the U.S. are expected to have a significantly higher level of national power than the other NEA states (see *Figure 2* and *Tables 1* and *3*). Looking forward to 2024–2030, the NEA power structure will likely be divided into two superpowers (China and the U.S.) and three regional great powers (Japan, Russia, and South Korea).



Figure 2.

**NATIONAL POWER OF THE SEVEN NEA STATES (2019–2030)**  
**НАЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ МОЩЬ СЕМИ ГОСУДАРСТВ**  
**СЕВЕРО-ВОСТОЧНОЙ АЗИИ (2019–2030)**



Sources: Ibid.

Table 3.

**NATIONAL POWER OF THE SEVEN NEA STATES IN 2024**  
**НАЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ МОЩЬ СЕМИ ГОСУДАРСТВ**  
**СЕВЕРО-ВОСТОЧНОЙ АЗИИ В 2024 г.**

	Tier	Country	Proportion
First tier	superpower	the U.S.	35.1%
	superpower	China	35.8%
Second tier	regional great power	Japan	13.6%
	regional great power	Russia	7.0%
	regional great power	South Korea	7.0%
Third tier	regional small power	North Korea	0.6%
		Mongolia	1.0%

Source: Ibid.

### China–U.S. Strategic Competition in NEA in the Next Decade

In the 2020s, the NEA power structure will evolve into “two superpowers and three regional great powers.” The U.S. will try to maintain its hegemony in the NEA region, but its capabilities and confidence will be weakened. China will strive to maintain the upward momentum of its comprehensive national power and reduce the negative effects imposed



by the strategic competition with the U.S. The narrowing power gap between China and the U.S. and the emerging power shift have led the U.S. to regard China as its primary strategic competitor in NEA and the world. There are essentially three aspects to the China–U.S. strategic competition in the NEA region: military competition, the competition between multilateral systems and bilateral alliances, and the competition between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

### *China–U.S. Military Competition in Northeast Asia*

The military competition between China and the U.S. revolves primarily around the development of next-generation missile technology, and this competition is extremely fierce. In order to gain a strategic advantage in NEA, China and the U.S. have actively developed various medium-range missiles and hypersonic weapon systems in recent years that are aimed at each other (*see Table 4*).<sup>1</sup> The U.S. has been developing its DeepStrike missile with a range of 700 km, as well as its Strategic Strike Cannon Artillery (1600 km), and strategic fire missiles that can reach as far as 2500 km. The Trump administration announced its withdrawal from the INF Treaty in February 2019. Since then, the U.S. has been looking for a country in the NEA region where it can deploy its medium-range missiles.<sup>2</sup> In March 2017, the U.S. started deployment of its THAAD anti-missile system in South Korea. The THAAD radar system will likely be able to detect a missile launch by China, should that happen.

In recent years, China has diversified its arsenal to promote its Anti-Access/Area Denial strategy (A2/AD). The Chinese army has fielded an DF-21D anti-vessel ballistic missile with a range of 1800–3000 km and DF-26 missiles with a range of 5000 km. China opposes the deployment by the U.S. of medium-range missiles in the Asia-Pacific region and hopes that countries such as South Korea and Japan will not allow medium-range missiles to be deployed in their respective territories.<sup>3</sup>

*Table 4.*

**HYPERSONIC WEAPONS FROM CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES  
ГИПЕРЗВУКОВОЕ ОРУЖИЕ КНР И США**

	Nation	Type	Range	Speed (Mach)	Launch Platform	Deployment year
Hypersonic Glide Vehicle (HGV)	U.S.	AGM-183A	-	20	B-52, F-35C	2021
	China	DF-ZF	2,000km	9	Dongfeng-17	2020–2030

1 Kang Choi, Beomchul Shin, and Jae-Kwang Kang, "The Shifting Environment in Northeast Asia and Our Responses," The Asian Institute for Policy Studies, September 30, 2019, accessed September 13, 2020, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/the-shifting-environment-in-northeast-asia-and-our-responses/>.

2 Ibid.

3 "Fu Cong, Director-General of the Department of Arms Control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Held a Briefing for Chinese and Foreign Media on INF Treaty and other Arms Control Issues," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, August 6, 2019, accessed September 13, 2020, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjbxw/t1686559.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1686559.shtml).

	Nation	Type	Range	Speed (Mach)	Launch Platform	Deployment year
Hypersonic Cruise Vehicle (HCV)	U.S.	HCSW	-	5	fighter, destroyer	2022
	China	Xingkong-2	-	6	ballistic missile	Under testing

**Source:** Min Seok Kim, "Active Development of Hypersonic Weapons among the U.S., Russia, and China," JoongAng Daily, July 19, 2019, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://news.joins.com/article/23529570>. Updates and translation have been made by the authors.

### *China–U.S. Competition: Multilateral Systems and Bilateral Alliances*

The multilateral cooperation system advocated by China and the bilateral alliance system led by the U.S. exist at the same time within NEA. There are significant differences between the advocating (leading) and participating countries in these systems, as well as in their theoretical underpinnings (see Table 5). Tensions exist between the multilateral cooperation system and the bilateral alliance system, which is manifested as multilateral vs. unilateral, multipolar vs. unipolar, and economic and trade means vs. military means.<sup>1</sup>

Table 5.

#### COMPARISON OF THE MULTILATERAL COOPERATION SYSTEM AND THE BILATERAL ALLIANCE SYSTEM IN NEA СРАВНЕНИЕ МНОГОСТОРОННИХ СИСТЕМ ВЗАИМОДЕЙСТВИЯ И ДВУСТОРОННИХ СОЮЗОВ В СЕВЕРО-ВОСТОЧНОЙ АЗИИ

	Multilateral cooperation system	Bilateral alliance system
Advocating countries (leading countries)	China	The United States
Participating countries	States in the whole region	States allied with the U.S. (Japan, South Korea)
Open or Closed	Open	Closed and exclusive
Theoretical underpinnings	Multilateralism	Alliance theory
Source of system stability	Common interests and international mechanisms	Advantage of power or balance of power
Relations of the two systems	Constant tension between the two systems	

**Source:** Qi, Huaigao. "Seventy Years of China's Multilateral Diplomacy toward Neighboring Countries: Developing Processes, Main Characters and Challenges," *World Economics and Politics*, no. 6 (June 2019): 58. The authors have made some updates of the form.

China actively promotes multilateral cooperation in the NEA region. It aims to the negotiations on a China–Japan–South Korea Free Trade Zone, calls for the resumption of the six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear issue, and promotes the replacement of the Korean Armistice Agreement with a peace treaty. China and the other NEA states have reached a series of multilateral institutional arrangements in various fields such as politics, security, economy, environment, disease control, combating transnational crime, and cyberspace (see Table 6).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Qi 2019, 57.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

Table 6.

**NEA MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS IN WHICH CHINA PARTICIPATES  
МНОГОСТОРОННИЕ ИНСТИТУТЫ СЕВЕРО-ВОСТОЧНОЙ АЗИИ  
С КИТАЙСКИМ ПРИСУТСТВИЕМ**

Field	Formal Institutional Arrangements	Informal Institutional Arrangements
Politics	China–Japan–Korea Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (Sep. 2011)	East Asia Summit (Nov. 2004)
Security	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (June 2001)	Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (Oct. 1992); Six-party talks mechanism (Aug. 2003); International Symposium on China–Japan–ROK Security Cooperation (April 2015)
Economy	Outline of the Construction of the China–Mongolia–Russia Economic Corridor (June 2016)	Greater Tumen Initiative (1991); Northeast Asia Free Trade Zone Initiative (Sep. 2011)
Environment	The U.N. Environment Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (June 1972)	East Asian Seas Action Plan (April 1981); Partnerships in Environmental Management for the Seas of East Asia (Dec. 1993); Northwest Pacific Action Plan (Sep. 1994); North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (1993)
Disease Control	WHO Western Pacific Regional Office (1951)	China–Korea Cooperation Mechanism on Joint Prevention and Control of Covid-19
Combating Transnational Crime	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (June 2001)	ASEAN and China–Japan–Korea Cooperation Mechanism on Combating Transnational Crime (Ministerial Level) (Jan. 2004)
Cyberspace	U.N. Group of Governmental Experts on Information Security (2004)	AALCO Working Group on International Law in Cyberspace (Sep. 2014)

**Source:** Compiled by the authors using information from the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China: "Countries and regions," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, accessed September 13, 2020, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/).

Japan and South Korea are critical of the NEA strategy of the U.S. Both the U.S.–Japan alliance and the U.S.–South Korea alliance are over 60 years old, with extensive economic and security cooperation agendas. Japan and South Korea continue to host the bulk of the forward deployed U.S. forces in the NEA region. The U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea aim not only to deter the North Korean threat, but also to balance China. Based on this strategy, the U.S. has spent significant efforts in recent years, strengthening trilateral cooperation with Japan and South Korea. However, a number of signs point to the debilitating nature of this cooperation, which is primarily due to the recent developments in each nation's domestic affairs, including the Trump administration's "America First" policy, the historical revisionism in Japan, and the focus on North Korea under the Moon administration.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. is expected to continue to adhere to its bilateral alliance policy in the next decade. And it will keep a cautious eye on the development of regionalism within NEA, suspicious of a multilateral framework that may push it to the sidelines.

1 Kang Choi, Beomchul Shin, and Jae-Kwang Kang, "The Shifting Environment in Northeast Asia and Our Responses."

### *Competition between the BRI and the Indo-Pacific Strategy*

The Silk Road Economic Belt was first proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in September 2013. One month later, he put forward the idea of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Together, the two are now referred to as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>1</sup> In May 2015, the Chinese and Russian leaders signed the *Joint Statement of China and Russia on Cooperation in the Construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union*. According to the joint statement, the two sides would work to connect the construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the development of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to strengthen regional economic integration.<sup>2</sup> In June 2016, China, Mongolia, and Russia developed the *Outline of the Construction of the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor*. The construction of this economic corridor will promote regional economic integration, as well as the integration of the respective development strategies of the countries involved, and lay a solid foundation for interconnecting their respective infrastructures.<sup>3</sup> In June 2017, China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and the State Oceanic Administration (SOC) released its *Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative*. The Vision proposes the joint construction of a blue economic passage leading to Europe via the Arctic Ocean.<sup>4</sup> This blue economic passage connects the ports along the NEA states (South Korea, Japan, and Russia) and docks with Russia's Northern Sea Route.

Japan and South Korea (the allies of the U.S. in the NEA region) have also participated in the BRI. In June 2017, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated that Japan would join China in the funding of BRI projects if certain conditions were met.<sup>5</sup> In May 2018, China and Japan signed a memorandum on third-party market cooperation between the enterprises of the two countries. South Korea's Moon Jae-in government actively participates in the construction of the BRI. In January 2020, the President said that South Korea would continue to accelerate the pace of docking and advance its New Southern and Northern policies with the BRI.<sup>6</sup>

In the U.S., the Trump administration is actively promoting its Indo-Pacific Strategy as a counterbalance to the BRI. In November 2017, President Trump proposed the advancement of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" during an official visit to Southeast Asia.<sup>7</sup> The U.S. Department of Defense released its *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* in June 2019, which singled out China, Russia, and North Korea as potential threats, saying that China is

- 1 "Building the Belt and Road: Concept, Practice and China's Contribution," Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative 2017, accessed September 14, 2020, [https://www.followingthemoney.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2017\\_Leading-Group-for-the-BRI\\_Building-the-Belt-and-Road\\_E.pdf](https://www.followingthemoney.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2017_Leading-Group-for-the-BRI_Building-the-Belt-and-Road_E.pdf).
- 2 "中华人民共和国与俄罗斯联邦关于丝绸之路经济带建设和欧亚经济联盟建设对接合作的联合声明 (全文) (Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Cooperation in the Construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union, signed on May 8, 2015)," Xinhua net., accessed September 13, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-05/09/c\\_127780866.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-05/09/c_127780866.htm).
- 3 "中蒙俄经济走廊规划纲要 (Outline of Construction of China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, signed on June 23, 2016)," NDRC, accessed September 13, 2020, [https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfb/ghwb/201609/t20160912\\_962194.html](https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfb/ghwb/201609/t20160912_962194.html).
- 4 "一带一路"建设海上合作设想 (Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative)," NDRC and SOC, June 19, 2017, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfb/tz/201711/W020190905503558343819.pdf>.
- 5 "Asia's Dream: Linking the Pacific and Eurasia"–Speech by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Banquet of the 23rd International Conference on The Future of Asia," Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, June 5, 2017, accessed September 13, 2020, [https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97\\_abe/statement/201706/1222768\\_11579.html](https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201706/1222768_11579.html).
- 6 "文在寅：将加快韩国发展战略规划同“一带一路”倡议对接 (Moo Jae-in: Moon: to Speed up South Korea's Strategic Development Plan to Dock with the Belt and Road Initiative)," Xinhua net, January 14, 2020, accessed September 13, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-01/14/c\\_1125461650.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-01/14/c_1125461650.htm).
- 7 "Remarks by President Trump on His Trip to Asia," The White House, November 15, 2017, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-trip-asia/>.

a revisionist power that specializes in a “predatory economy”.<sup>1</sup> The Report emphasizes that the U.S.–Japan Alliance is “the cornerstone of peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific,” the U.S.–ROK Alliance “the linchpin of peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia,” and the U.S.–Japan–ROK trilateral partnership “critical to peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region.” Meanwhile, Mongolia is regarded as an important Indo-Pacific partner.<sup>2</sup> In January 2020, an assessment report submitted by the Center for a New American Security to the U.S. Congress pointed out that the U.S. criticizes China for driving a more closed and illiberal future for the Indo-Pacific, which would undermine vital U.S. interests.<sup>3</sup>

China is skeptical of the potential risks that the Indo-Pacific Strategy may contain. In July 2019, China’s State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed his views on the Indo-Pacific concept. He believes that regional cooperation initiatives and designs should follow the following three principles: “Firstly, focusing on East Asia and Asia, without affecting the existing cooperation mechanisms and achievements in the region; secondly, focusing on cooperation and consensus, without engaging in geographic confrontation and games; thirdly, focusing on openness and inclusiveness, without forming factions or seeking small cliques.”<sup>4</sup> Japanese scholar Yamazaki Amane believes that China views the Indo-Pacific Strategy as an example of Washington’s power politics, which are intended to impede Beijing’s relationship with neighboring countries.<sup>5</sup> If the U.S. uses the Indo-Pacific Strategy as a tool to interfere with BRI and even contain China, China will firmly oppose it.

### **The Foreign Policy Adjustment of NEA States Facing China–U.S. Strategic Competition**

Facing the China–U.S. strategic competition in the next decade, the NEA states at the second and third tiers will make corresponding policy adjustments. Although they are all subject to the “two superpowers and three regional great powers” structure in the next decade, the second-tier states will have more room for strategic choice than the third-tier states. At the second tier of the NEA power structure, Russia, Japan, and South Korea will pursue regional great power diplomacy and to further their regional interests. North Korea and Mongolia, ranking at the third tier of the NEA power structure, will concentrate on ensuring the survival of their regimes and on national security.

#### *Russia’s Foreign Policy Adjustment: Balancing between China and the U.S.*

Russia has traditionally focused its diplomatic efforts on Europe. However, in 2010, it announced its “turn to the East” foreign policy. The profile of the NEA region in Russian foreign policy has risen considerably since 2010. In Bobo Lo’s opinion, Russia’s fundamental objectives in NEA include undermining U.S. strategic dominance; an abiding faith in the balance of power; and the reliance on traditional strengths such as military

1 “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report.”

2 *Ibid.*, 21–46.

3 Ely Ratner, Daniel Kliman, Susanna V. Blume, et al., “Rising to the China Challenge: Renewing American Competitiveness in the Indo-Pacific,” Center for a New American Security, January 28, 2020, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/rising-to-the-china-challenge>.

4 “Wang Yi talks about the Indo-Pacific Concept,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, July 31, 2019, accessed September 13, 2020, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1685652.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1685652.shtml).

5 “The PRC’s Cautious Stance on the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy,” News Brake, February 28, 2020, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://www.newsbreak.com/news/1517838243723/the-prcs-cautious-stance-on-the-us-indo-pacific-strategy>.

might, geopolitical reach, and the energy sector.<sup>1</sup> Although becoming less “West-centric” is a very long process, the essential truth is that Russia’s long-term future depends on a much more substantial and effective engagement with the NEA region. In the next decade, Russia’s foreign policy priorities in NEA are expected to include the following:

First, it will likely maintain a maximum balance in the China–U.S. strategic competition. China has become a key economic, financial, and technological partner for Russia. Russia will continue to develop its strategic partnership with China, which is certainly in Moscow’s best interests, while trying to maintain a certain balance in their relations at the same time.<sup>2</sup> Considering that the U.S. regards China as its main rival, Russia will try to restart relations with the U.S. However, this is easier said than done, since the hostility of the U.S. political elites towards Russia has not disappeared or diminished. In addition, Russia will work hard to develop relations with E.U. countries, as well as with India and Japan in order to ensure a geopolitical balance in Eurasia. The most important principle is that Russia will carefully maintain a balance within the strategic competition between China and the U.S.

Second, Russia will actively promote economic cooperation in NEA and use the investments from other NEA states to develop its Far East region. Russia launched the Eastern Economic Forum (EEF) in 2015, which aims to support the economic development of Russia’s Far East and expand international cooperation in the Asia-Pacific. As of September 2019, Russia had hosted five EEFs. Over 1,780 new investment projects worth over RUB 3.8 trillion and 230 new enterprises have appeared in Russia’s Far East during the last five years.<sup>3</sup> Investment from China has accounted for 71 percent of the total direct foreign investments (worth 33 billion USD) that have come to Russia’s Far East in the past four years.<sup>4</sup> Russia will continue to build good-neighborly relations and promote mutually beneficial cooperation with Japan,<sup>5</sup> although Japan claims four Southern Kuril Islands, which have been under Russia’s jurisdiction for more than seven decades. Moscow aims to continue discussing political issues for as long as possible, without losing sovereignty over any of its territories. At the same time, it hopes to attract Japanese investment and expanding trade with the country.<sup>6</sup>

Russia views South Korea as a potentially important economic partner in developing the Russian Far East. Russian President Vladimir Putin and South Korean President Moon Jae-in agree that trilateral economic cooperation with North Korea is needed.<sup>7</sup> It would not be an exaggeration to predict that China, Japan and South Korea will become more important economic partners for Russia in terms of developing its Far East region.

1 Bobo Lo, “The Return: Russia and the Security Landscape of Northeast Asia,” Ifri, March 2020, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/etudes-de-lifri/russienseireports/return-russia-and-security-landscape-northeast-asia>.

2 Dmitri Trenin, “How Russia Can Maintain Equilibrium in the Post-Pandemic Bipolar World,” Carnegie Moscow Center, May 1, 2020, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81702>.

3 Yury Trutnev, “Address of the Chair of the Organizing Committee, 2015,” Eastern Economic Forum, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://forumvostok.ru/en/about-the-forum/>.

4 “Interview: Cooperation between Russia, China Flourishes in Far East, Says Minister,” Xinhua net., September 4, 2019, accessed September 13, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-09/04/c\\_138365008.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-09/04/c_138365008.htm).

5 Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации (утверждена Президентом Российской Федерации В.В. Путиным 30 ноября 2016 г.) // Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/Срт1CkV6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/Срт1CkV6BZ29/content/id/2542248). (дата обращения 13.09.2020).

6 Liudmila Zakharova, “Russia and Northeast Asia: Pursuing Strategic and Economic Goals,” Global Asia, December 21, 2017, accessed September 13, 2020, [https://www.globalasia.org/v12no4/cover/russia-and-northeast-asia-pursuing-strategic-and-economic-goals\\_liudmila-zakharova](https://www.globalasia.org/v12no4/cover/russia-and-northeast-asia-pursuing-strategic-and-economic-goals_liudmila-zakharova).

7 “Moon, Putin Agree on Need for Trilateral Cooperation with N. Korea,” Yonhap, April 29, 2018, accessed September 13, 2020, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180429000277>.



Third, Russia will not hesitate to look after its national interests in political and security affairs. For example, regarding the Kuril Islands (Northern Territories) dispute with Japan, Russia's position is as follows: signing a peace treaty first and then solving the territorial dispute and jointly developing the four islands even with Japan's economic temptation. The fact of the matter is that Russia is not willing to give up its strategic interests on the four islands. On the North Korean nuclear issue, Russia does not intervene deeply, but uses its status as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council to force other countries to treat its interests seriously.

### *Japan's Foreign Policy Adjustment: Remaining Highly Flexible*

Japan will try to remain highly flexible on its NEA strategic choice. On the one hand, it seeks to maximize security guarantees from the U.S., while on the other, it actively strives to develop economic cooperation with China.

Due to islands dispute and maritime security competition with China in the East China Sea, Japan hopes to use its alliance with the U.S. to ensure its security and counterbalance China. There are disputes over the territorial sovereignty of the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands and maritime delimitation in the East China Sea between China and Japan. The escalation of the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands dispute since 2010 has soured relations even more between the two countries. In July 2014, the Shinzo Abe government issued a Cabinet Decision on the interpretation of the measures for Self-Defense permitted under Article 9 of the Constitution of Japan, which stated that the government would commence the task of drafting legislation that enables seamless responses to any situations.<sup>1</sup> In September 2015, Japan's National Diet passed the Legislation for Peace and Security, which consists of the Act for the Development of the Legislation for Peace and Security (effectively a host of partial amendments to existing laws) and the newly enacted International Peace Support Act.<sup>2</sup> The Legislation for Peace and Security came into effect in March 2016.

The Abe government has been working to improve its tense diplomatic relations with China since 2017 when it adjusted its policy toward the country. It has also changed its opinion of China's BRI and intensified the negotiation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with China. Japan has also rebranded its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy as a vision, adopting a relatively more cooperative approach, and emphasizing the promotion of free trade. The aim of Japan's FOIP is to link Asia and Africa and connect the Indian and Pacific oceans. Tokyo is attempting to garner more support from partners, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Australia, and India, in order to promote FOIP as a non-divisive strategy.<sup>3</sup> The adjusted FOIP features "duality" in that it is both competitive and cooperative towards China.

Japan has maintained good diplomatic relations with China and the U.S. since 2017. The country stands in a unique position and may play the role of boosting cooperation and limiting conflict between China, and the U.S.<sup>4</sup> Japan is expected

1 "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, November 29, 2019, accessed September 13, 2020, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e\\_000278.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e_000278.html).

2 "Outline of the Legislation for Peace and Security," Ministry of Defense of Japan, accessed September 13, 2020, [https://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w\\_paper/pdf/2016/DOJ2016\\_2-3-2\\_web.pdf](https://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/pdf/2016/DOJ2016_2-3-2_web.pdf).

3 Ibid.

4 Ian Bremmer, "The End of the American International Order: What Comes Next?" Time, November 18, 2019, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://time.com/5730849/end-american-order-what-next/>.



to continue to maintain its alliance with the U.S. while trying to maintain good relations with China in the 2020s.

### *South Korea's Foreign Policy Adjustment: Searching for Autonomy*

South Korea is perhaps the most sensitive of the three regional great powers to the dynamic NEA power structure. One reason for this is that any major changes in the NEA power structure may pose a major security challenge to the country. South Korea's President Moon Jae-in is thus trying to carve out as much economic and strategic autonomy as possible.<sup>1</sup>

First, South Korea will implement the "two superpowers diplomacy" in its relations with the U.S. and China in order to enhance its own strategic autonomy. The Moon Jae-in administration and the future South Korean government will remain committed to its alliance with the U.S., but it will not agree to form a U.S.–Japan–ROK trilateral alliance. At the same time, it will actively seek to improve relations with China, which have been damaged by the deployment of THAAD. It is expected that South Korea will adopt a "wait and see" strategy in terms of any changes in the strategic competition between China and the U.S. For example, it will be cautious about taking any action with regard to the Huawei incident, so as to reduce the negative impact of China–U.S. competition.

Second, South Korea will try to put forward initiatives for the NEA region and even broader regions. For example, in 2005, former President Roh Moo-hyun proposed the "Northeast Asia Balancer Diplomacy"; in 2009, his successor, Lee Myung-bak, put forward the "New Asia Initiative"; in 2013, President Park Geun-hye proposed the "Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative"; and now President Moon Jae-in has proposed the "Responsible Northeast Asia Plus Community" policy. South Korea is expected to act as a coordinator in shaping NEA cooperation initiatives and mechanisms in the next decade, thereby shaping the development of regional cooperation.

However, South Korea's search for autonomy will be constrained by the situation on the Korean Peninsula. With the intensification of U.S.–China strategic competition and the tensions on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea will have limited room for maneuver in the region. It would be in China's interests to encourage South Korea's autonomy in NEA affairs.

### *North Korea's Foreign Policy Adjustment: Pursuing National Security*

North Korea is primarily interested in ensuring national security, but its strategy has shifted from "military-first politics" and "simultaneous nuclear and economic development" to "economic construction." During the Kim Jong-il era, North Korea insisted on the development of nuclear weapons and missile programs and adopted a "military-first" policy.

With the arrival of Kim Jong-un in late 2011, North Korea has stepped up its efforts to promote its nuclear weapons and its missile capabilities. During his rule, North Korea has conducted four nuclear tests and multiple ballistic missile tests. At the same time, however, Kim Jong-un is focused on developing North Korea's economy and is striving

1 Daekwon Son, and Andray Abrahamian, "South Korea's Search for Autonomy," *The Interpreter*, December 15, 2017, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/south-korea-search-autonomy>.

to increase comprehensive power to in order to maintain the country's national security effectively. In 2019, the North Korean economy (real GDP) increased by 1.8%, reversing the two consecutive years of negative growth in 2017 (–3.5%) and 2018 (–4.2%).

Since 2018, the situation on the Korean Peninsula has started to ease somewhat. In June of that year, Kim Jong-un and Trump met for the first time in Singapore and issued a joint statement that included the following main points: (1) President Trump committed to provide security guarantees to the DPRK; (2) Chairman Kim Jong-un reaffirmed his firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula; (3) The United States and the DPRK commit to establish new U.S.–DPRK relations; (4) The United States and the DPRK will join their efforts to build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>1</sup>

Kim Jong-un visited China four times between March 2018 and January 2019 (he visited in March, May, and June of 2018 and then in January 2019), which resulted in closer ties between the two nations. Relations improved dramatically after the North Korean and Chinese leaders met three times over the course of 2018. In April 2018, Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un met in Panmunjom and signed the *Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity, and Unification of the Korean Peninsula*, announcing that the two parties would work towards the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and the conversion of the suspension mechanism.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the significant easing of the situation on the Korean Peninsula, tensions between North Korea and the U.S. and between North and South Korea are unlikely to be resolved soon. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted 22 resolutions concerning North Korea between July 2006 and March 2020, condemning North Korea's nuclear missile tests and imposing sanctions against the country.<sup>3</sup> Moving forward, North Korea will continue to develop ties with China and Russia, establish a new model of relations with the U.S., and lobby the U.S. to lift the sanctions.

### *Mongolia's Foreign Policy Adjustment: Developing with "Third Neighbors"*

Mongolia's NEA strategy is to prioritize relations with Russia and China, and proactively develop its relations with so-called "third neighbors." Strengthening its relationship with its two immediate neighbors, Russia and China, does not mean that it will be aligned with either of them or indeed with any third power. Instead, Mongolia aims to promote, to the extent possible, a balanced relationship with both its neighbors.<sup>4</sup> Beyond China and Russia, Mongolia is also diversifying its foreign relations through its "third neighbor" policy.

"Third neighbor" countries include not only the states such as the U.S., Germany, and Japan, but also international organizations such as the United Nations (U.N.),

1 "Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit," White House, June 12, 2018, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit/>.

2 "Panmunjom Declaration on Peace, Prosperity and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Korea, April 27, 2018, accessed September 13, 2020, [https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5478/view.do?seq=319130&srchFr=&%3BsrchTo=&%3BsrchWord=&%3BsrchTp=&%3Bmulti\\_itm\\_seq=0&%3Bitm\\_seq\\_1=0&%3Bitm\\_seq\\_2=0&%3Bcompany\\_cd=&%3Bcompany\\_nm=&page=1&titleNm=](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5478/view.do?seq=319130&srchFr=&%3BsrchTo=&%3BsrchWord=&%3BsrchTp=&%3Bmulti_itm_seq=0&%3Bitm_seq_1=0&%3Bitm_seq_2=0&%3Bcompany_cd=&%3Bcompany_nm=&page=1&titleNm=)

3 "UN Documents for DPRK (North Korea): Security Council Resolutions," Security Council Report, accessed September 13, 2020, [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un\\_documents\\_type/security-council-resolutions/page/1?ctype=DPRK+%28North+Korea%29&cbtype=dprk-north-korea#038;cbtype=dprk-north-korea](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/security-council-resolutions/page/1?ctype=DPRK+%28North+Korea%29&cbtype=dprk-north-korea#038;cbtype=dprk-north-korea).

4 Jargalsaikhan Enkhsaikhan, "Mongolian Foreign Policy: A Small State with Big Aspirations," East Asia Forum, April 2, 2014, accessed September 13, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/04/02/mongolian-foreign-policy-a-small-state-with-big-aspirations/>.

the European Union (E.U.), and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).<sup>1</sup> Through the “third neighbors” policy, Mongolia strives to align its interests with those of developed countries and international organizations. The overarching goal of the policy is to create a political, economic, and legal environment where Mongolia’s economy, national security, and prosperity depend not only on its two immediate neighbors, but also on the strategic interests and interdependence of third neighbors.<sup>2</sup> As far as Mongolia’s diplomatic practice is concerned, the U.S. is the most important “third neighbor” country. One reason for this is that the U.S. is the only country that has enough power to balance China and Russia. Japan and South Korea also fall under the “third neighbor” banner, and Mongolia is focusing on developing relations with these two countries in the NEA region, and may play a role in the NEA multilateral framework in the future. Mongolia may be a small country, but it has lofty diplomatic ambitions.

### **China’s Strategic Choices for NEA in the Next Decade**

At the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in October 2017, the CPC put forward a plan to make China a great modern socialist country by the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to the new plan, China’s development goal is to implement socialist modernization between 2020 and 2035.<sup>3</sup> Maintaining long-term stability in NEA is an important external environmental guarantee for China to be a great modern socialist country. China’s strategic choices for NEA in the next decade include the following:

First, China will try to avoid a “new Cold War” and achieve a strategic balance with the U.S. in the NEA region. At present, military competition between China and the U.S. in NEA revolves primarily around the development of next-generation missile technology, and each country has its own advantages in this area. China is closing in on the U.S. in terms of its national power, and the two states are forming a strategic balance. In order to ensure superiority in the strategic competition with China, the U.S. will continue to focus on the development of the U.S.–Japan–Korea trilateral relationship in the next decade. China will develop bilateral relations with the other NEA countries and establish an NEA partnership network. To avoid confrontation and conflict with the U.S., the authors argue that China can apply an institutional balancing strategy toward the U.S. Such a strategy suggests that the deepening economic interdependence creates conditions under which the countries are more likely to adopt a realistic balancing strategy to counter each other and pursue security through international institutions. At the same time, China will also strive to create opportunities for cooperation with the U.S. in the NEA region, which include combating infectious diseases (such as COVID-19, etc.), preventing financial crises, responding to climate change, preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, and achieving lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Second, China will always maintain a friendly and close strategic partnership with Russia. Developing friendly relations with Russia is not a whim for China, but a long-term strategic choice. China and Russia share common interests in resisting American

1 Ibid.

2 Ulambayar 2013, 49.

3 “Full text of Xi Jinping’s Report at 19th CPC National Congress,” Xinhua net., November 3, 2017, accessed September 13, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c\\_136725942.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm).

unipolar hegemony as well as support each other in events involving their respective national interests. China did not condemn Russia for its actions during the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 or the Ukrainian crisis of 2014. Russia, in turn, has never criticized China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> However, China and Russia do have certain problems and differences at the regional level. The two countries are rivals in a number of geopolitical areas, as both have attempted to expand the scope of their respective regional influence: for example, Russia's policies toward Vietnam, the disagreements between the two countries in Central Asia, and their behavior in the Arctic.<sup>2</sup> In Central Asia, China has been one of Russia's biggest trade partners and investors within the BRI. However, Russia regards Central Asia as a top priority region that is within the area of its geopolitical interests. China will take into account Russia's concerns as much as possible when developing relations with Central Asian countries. For example, China actively promotes the joining of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the Eurasian Economic Union, welcomes Russia's "Greater Eurasian Partnership Initiative," and promotes the country's participation in the China-Kyrgyzstan-Ukraine railway extension projects. In short, China will respect Russia's geopolitical interests in Eurasia.

Third, China will actively promote economic cooperation with the other NEA states. China will combine its Revitalizing Northeast Strategy with participation in the development of the Russian Far East, and actively implement the *Sino-Russian Cooperation and Development Plan in Russia's Far East Region* (2018–2024). Beijing will also actively promote the construction of the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, the docking of the "Silk Road Economic Belt," and the joint EAEU-Mongolia "Prairie Road Program." In addition, China will accelerate negotiations on the China-Japan-South Korea Free Trade Zone and promote "China-Japan-South Korea + X" cooperation. North Korea will also be encouraged to integrate into the economic cooperation process in NEA, thereby creating new investment opportunities in the region.

Fourth, China will promote the establishment of a regional security mechanism that includes all the NEA states. It will regard the settlement of the North Korean nuclear issue as a breakthrough and promote the signing of the proposed Peace Treaty on the Korean Peninsula in the near future. When promoting the settlement of the North Korean nuclear issue, China would prefer a package resolution by putting the concerns of all NEA parties in the negotiations on the Korean Peninsula peace mechanism. A durable peace regime in NEA should be a multilateral construction, one that includes China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Mongolia, Russia, and the U.S. The authors argue that the NEA states can discuss the possibility of establishing a "Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Organization" (NEAPCO)<sup>3</sup> in the future.

Fifth, China may promote the construction of a collective NEA identity. China can advocate "harmonious but different" concepts in NEA to reduce strategic suspicion among the countries in the region. The authors believe that, since most NEA states have been profoundly influenced throughout their history by Confucian culture, China can combine

1 Korolev 2016, 389.

2 Ibid., 390–391.

3 The authors refer to Georgy Toloraya's innovative thoughts on the establishment of a "Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Organization" (NEAPCO). See: Georgy Toloraya, "Russia and North-East Asian Security & Cooperation," CSCAP-Russia, December 2013, accessed September 13, 2020, <http://www.cscap.org/uploads/docs/Related%20Research/9GCRussiaAndNEASec&Coop-GeorgyToloraya.pdf>.

the essence of Chinese Confucianism, such as “datong shijie” (“a world of grand unity”), “tianren heyi” (“the unity of heaven and humanity”), “rendao zhuyi” (humanitarianism), and “heping zhuyi” (pacifism), with the development of NEA in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. China needs to learn from its traditional philosophy and propose the new concepts of regional collective identity that can be embraced by many of the NEA states. Maybe the “Community with a Shared Future for Mankind” expounded by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2017 can also be viewed as an approach to constructing collective NEA identity.<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusion

In the 2020s, the NEA will continue the power structure of the “weakening unipolarity of the U.S.” that began in the first decade of 21st century and has evolved into a power structure with “two superpowers and three regional great powers.” According to the “national power index of the NEA states” model constructed by the authors (see *Table 1*), China’s national power will continue to rise and, according to forecasts, it will reach the same national power level as the U.S. around 2024 (see *Figure 2*). In the 2020s, China and the U.S. will occupy the first tier of the NEA power structure. Russia, Japan, and South Korea will be in the second tier, while North Korea and Mongolia will hold the third tier. Looking forward to 2024–2030, the NEA power structure will likely be divided into two superpowers (China and the U.S.) and three regional great powers (Russia, Japan, and South Korea).

In the context of the evolution of this power structure, the main conflict in the 2020s will be the strategic competition between China and the U.S. The U.S. regards NEA as a key region for maintaining its hegemony and regards China as its main strategic competitor. China has further developed partnerships with the other NEA states and has strived to narrow the power gap with the U.S. There are essentially three aspects to the China–U.S. strategic competition in the NEA region: military competition, the competition between multilateral systems and bilateral alliances, and the competition between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Facing the China–U.S. strategic competition in the next decade, the NEA countries at the second and third tiers will make respective policy adjustments. At the second tier of the NEA power structure, Russia, Japan, and South Korea will pursue regional great power diplomacy and to further their regional interests. Russia will work to maintain a balance between China and the U.S. and use the investments from the other NEA states pragmatically to develop its Far East region. Japan will seek to maximize its security guarantees from the U.S. while actively obtaining economic benefits from China, and will try to remain flexible in terms of its NEA strategic choice. South Korea will stick to the “two superpowers diplomacy” in its relations with the U.S. and China in order to strengthen its own strategic autonomy. With relatively weak national power, North Korea and Mongolia occupy the third tier of the NEA power structure. North Korea will struggle

1 “习近平：决胜全面建成小康社会 夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利——在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告 (Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era: Xi Jinping Delivers at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on October 18, 2017),” Xinhua net., October 27, 2017, accessed September 13, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/19cpcnc/2017-10/27/c\\_1121867529.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/19cpcnc/2017-10/27/c_1121867529.htm).

to ensure its regime security and will establish a new model of relations with the U.S. and continue to develop ties with China and Russia. Mongolia will likely prioritize relations with its two immediate neighbors, China and Russia, and proactively develop its relations with “third neighbors” on the basis of balancing the influence of China and Russia.

Maintaining long-term stability of the NEA is an important external environmental guarantee for China to become a great modern socialist country. China’s strategic choices for NEA in the next decade are likely to include five aspects: 1) to avoid a “new Cold War” and achieve a strategic balance with the U.S.; 2) to maintain friendly and close strategic ties with Russia; 3) to actively promote economic cooperation with the other NEA countries; 4) to promote the future establishment of a regional security mechanism that includes all the NEA states, for example, a “Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Organization” (NEAPCO); and 5) to construct a collective NEA identity.

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Received: July 31, 2020. Accepted: September 13, 2020.

#### Acknowledgments

The authors thank two anonymous reviewers of *Journal of International Analytics*, Research Fellow Liu Ming and Assistant Research Fellow Wu Qisheng of the Institute of International Studies at Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, and Associate Professor Pan Yaling at the Institute of Indian Studies of Yunnan University, for their helpful comments. Thanks also to MA Dong Yi and MA Song Xingyan at School of International Relations and Public Affairs at Fudan University for collecting research materials.

#### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

#### For citation

Qi Huaigao, and Li Kaisheng. “The Shifting Power Structure of Northeast Asia and China’s Strategic Choices in the 2020s,” *The Journal of International Analytics* 11, no. 2 (October 2020): 45–67.

<https://doi.org/10.46272/2587-8476-2020-11-2-45-67>



# Меняющаяся властная иерархия Северо-Восточной Азии и стратегические интересы Китая в 2020-е годы

## АННОТАЦИЯ

Расклад сил в Северо-Восточной Азии (СВА) демонстрирует ослабление однополярности во главе с Соединенными Штатами (США), что приведет к появлению структуры с «многосторонним взаимодействием двух сверхдержав (Китая и США) и трёх региональных великих держав (Россия, Япония и Южная Корея)» в третьем десятилетии XXI века. В контексте изменения соотношения сил другие пять стран СВА будут менять дипломатическую политику.

Япония, Россия и Южная Корея, занимающие второе место в раскладе сил СВА, будут стремиться преследовать региональные интересы. Россия будет бережно поддерживать равновесие в отношениях с Китаем и США и прагматично использовать инвестиции других стран СВА для развития своего дальневосточного региона. Япония будет стремиться получить от США максимальную гарантию безопасности, в то же время активно получая экономические выгоды от Китая, и постарается сохранить высокую гибкость в стратегическом выборе СВА. Южная Корея будет осуществлять «дипломатию двух сверхдержав» в отношении США и Китая для усиления своей стратегической автономии. Северная Корея и Монголия, занимающие третье место из-за их относительно слабой национальной мощи, будут стремиться к выживанию в режиме и национальной безопасности. Ожидается, что перечень стратегических выборов Китая для СВА в следующем десятилетии, вероятно, будет включать пять аспектов: во-первых, избежание «новой холодной войны» и достижение стратегического баланса с США; во-вторых, постоянное поддержание дружеского и тесного стратегического партнерства с Россией; в-третьих, активное содействие экономическому сотрудничеству с другими странами СВА; в-четвертых, содействие созданию регионального механизма безопасности, включающего все государства СВА, например, создание в будущем «Организации мира и сотрудничества в Северо-Восточной Азии»; в-пятых, построение коллективной идентичности в СВА.

## КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

*Северо-Восточная Азия (СВА), властная иерархия,  
стратегическая конкуренция КНР и США, стратегические решения*

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Поступила в редакцию: 31 июля 2020. Принята к публикации: 13 сентября 2020.



**Благодарности**

Авторы выражают благодарность двум анонимным рецензентам журнала «Международная аналитика», научному сотруднику Лю Мин и младшему научному сотруднику У Цишен Института международных исследований Шанхайской академии общественных наук, доценту Института исследований Индии Юньнаньского университета Пан Ялин за их полезные комментарии.

Также авторы признательны студентам Ю Дон и Синьян Сун Школы международных отношений Фуданьского университета за сбор исследовательских материалов.

**Конфликт интересов**

Авторы заявляют об отсутствии потенциального конфликта интересов.

**Цитирование**

Ци Хуайгао, Ли Кайшэн. Меняющаяся властная иерархия Северо-Восточной Азии и стратегические интересы Китая в 2020е годы // Международная аналитика. – 2020. – Том 11 (2). – С. 45–67.  
<https://doi.org/10.46272/2587-8476-2020-11-2-45-67>