

Korea and the South China Sea: Geopolitical Meeting Places of the World Powers

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I

In the world's planetary power-system there are two global "nuclear suns", the USA and the Soviet Union, as well as a "rising sun", (1) China.

The "Middle Kingdom" of old, China, is now the world's most populous country. (2) In her compelling geo-strategic position, and as a nuclear state and permanent member of the UN Security Council, China is not only the main regional power in East and South-East Asia; since she opened up to the world at large after Mao's death in 1976, she also affects global affairs. Following a policy of equidistance to the Soviet Union and USA, though at differing cost and benefits, China has become an emerging world power in her own right.

The "planet" of Japan is in military terms rather a small power, but in economic terms a giant and, therefore, carries weight in related politics of the region as well as the world in general. Her gross national product is now the second in the world (after USA); as an exporter and importer she is number three (after USA and West Germany) but ranks high as an overseas investor. The "Rising Sun" in Japan's National flag seems to be indicative of the country's future position in the world. But she will remain dependant on the American nuclear umbrella. Two other "planets" of the world's planetary power-system, near-by India in the West and further away Canada in the North-East, may gain influence on South-East Asia in the foreseeable future though not throughout the world.

The distant West European Economic Community increased its membership from six to ten "stars" but weakened in unity, and looks now more like "star dust". However, its relationship with the free-market grouping of ASEAN, the "Association of (six) South-East Asian Nations" (3), has gone beyond the purely economic and points to the value of intra-regional cooperation and also inter-regional coordination.

For geo-political as well as geo-strategic reasons the three greatest powers, USA, Soviet Union, and China, are directly facing each other over the Korean peninsula and the South China Sea. In some parts of Africa, the three powers compete with each other for political influence or economic advantages. Other regions (e.g. West Asia and Europe) exert a geo-political pull on the two super-powers and not - or not yet - on China or on just one of them (e.g. South America on the USA). In our time of accelerating, unremitting change and increasing interdependence, the old concept of "spheres of influence", (4) is becoming supplemented by geo-political "meeting places" of world powers. They serve these powers as "testing grounds" for probing each other's resolve and as "arenas" for potential conflicts at a time when nuclear "Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles" (ICBM's) have made possible "mutually assured destruction". The vast realm of new Pacific island states, or the Arabian Sea, or - if worse comes to worse - the Antarctic continent (twice the size of Australia) may become the next "geo-political meeting places of the world powers" in the future.

II

But "world politics without historical insight has no roots, just as history without application to the present may not bear fruits". (5)

The historical center of gravity of the East Asian - West Pacific Region was originally its northern part, though it is now gradually being extended to the South China Sea. For geo-political and economic reasons the north became an area of persisting military contention between imperialist powers, especially after Japan had forced Korea, "Land of the Morning Calm", to "open up" in 1876. The USA, which had previously done the same to Japan (1853/54), and the European colonial powers followed suit.

Imperialist Russia under the Czars in 1639 had already gained access to the Pacific at the expense of non-Slavic people and states (amongst them China) east of the Ural Mountains - an area twice as large as the USA but only sparsely populated. The foundation of Vladivostok (= "Reign over the East") at the Sea of Japan just north of Korea in 1860, and the sale of Alaska to the USA in 1867, had marked the boundaries of Russia's expansion in the East. The two future super-powers were now separated by only 35 km across the Bering Strait of the North Pacific.

In 1884, the Japanese supported a revolt in Korea against the court, which did not want the country to adapt to the Western world and asked China, the "older brother" in the Confucian tradition, for help. A decade later (1894), Japan also brought troops into Korea and declared war on China, defeating her within a year, thereby gaining "Formosa" (since 1945 Taiwan).⁽⁶⁾ When the Japanese ignored their guarantee of Korea's independence, her king turned to the Russians to train his army. In 1898, he proclaimed the neutrality of his country after Japan and Russia had agreed not to interfere directly in its affairs.

At the turn of our century, Russia and Japan had become engaged in fierce rivalry concentrating on Manchuria, territory north-east of the Great Wall of China; with her it had just been integrated. The railways joining Manchuria's southern-most harbours, Dairen and Port Arthur (now Lüta), with the Trans-Siberian line was already being built and controlled by Russia, when the xenophobe Boxers in China staged their uprising. Russian military forces were sent to Manchuria even after China had signed the Boxer Protocol (1901). Japan was alarmed. She secured an alliance with Britain in 1902⁽⁷⁾, and, after intensive military preparations, demanded from Russia a date for the withdrawal of her troops from Manchuria. Breaking off the long-drawn negotiations at St. Petersburg in 1904, Japan first took Port Arthur, defeated a Russian army at Mukden (now Shenyang), invaded Korea, and finished the war by her astounding victory over the Russian fleet at the naval battle off Tsushima, an island group in the Korea Strait, the southern outlet of the Sea of Japan.⁽⁸⁾ The Russian fleet, on its way from Europe around Africa to relieve Port Arthur, had bunkered coal at the Vietnamese harbour of Cam Ranh Bay, which is now used by the Soviet Pacific Fleet sailing, so to speak, in the opposite direction.

By the Treaty of Portsmouth/USA in 1905, mediated by U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, Russia renounced all rights to interfere in Korea whereas Japanese rights were recognized by the United States and Great Britain. In 1910, Japan annexed Korea (till 1945).

After World War I (1914-18), a Korean provisional government formed by nationalist groups in Shanghai made strenuous efforts to gain recognition at the Paris Peace Conference (1919) and at the Washington Conference (1921-22), but failed. The latter conference had been called because Britain, the United States, and Japan were afraid of unrestrained competition in their naval armaments. Related to this problem was the ominous rivalry between the United States and

Japan due to the ambitions which the Japanese had revealed in 1905 and 1910 and again in 1919, when they claimed the right to dominate the Chinese province of Shantung (including the former German colony of Tsingtao), whereas China wanted to rid herself of the "unequal treaties" and gain strength vis-a-vis the Western powers and Japan.

In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria (de facto independent since 1917) and changed it into the puppet state of Manchukuo; in 1937, Japanese troops advanced in a war-like manner to the south of China and, after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, penetrated into south-east Asia.

Just before the end of World War II, Soviet fighting troops entered Korea from the north and, one month later, U.S. troops from the south and, in carrying out the Japanese surrender, divided the country into Soviet and U.S. areas at the 38th parallel. Elections were held in South Korea on May 10, 1948, under the supervision of the "UN Temporary Commission on Korea" whereas the Soviet command denied the UN Commission permission to enter its area. In the same year the Republic of (South) Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of (North) Korea came into being.

The fate of Korea, even divided against herself, has become the "barometer" for the balance of power among the global and regional powers. A substantial part of their various geo-political ambitions in the region has been arrested by the creation of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) around Korea's 38th parallel after the Korean Armistice Agreement had been signed in July 1953. It terminated the Korean War which had started in June 1950 by a surprise attack of North Korean forces. This happened only a year after the USA had withdrawn her troops from South Korea and had thwarted with an air-lift the Soviet blockade of Berlin at the end of the Euro-Asian land masses. The Armistice, still being observed, is, however, binding only upon the military forces of North Korea, the Chinese People's Volunteers, and the 16 UN Member nations who furnished combat forces.(9) Any attempt at reunification of Korea(10) remained unsuccessful since North Korea insisted that the U.S. troops withdraw first. This precondition, which was unacceptable to the USA and South Korea, was dropped in a proposal by North Korean President Kim Il Sung for a peace conference between USA and North Korea, including - for the first time - also the South Korean "authorities" on an equal footing (both sides avoid the term "government" because they do not recognize each other). The message was privately delivered to U.S. President Reagan by Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang when he visited Washington in January, 1984. The

first moves had already been made by the North Koreans through Chinese officials in Peking on 8 October, 1983, only one day before a North Korean commando attempted to assassinate South Korean President Chun Doo Hwang in Rangoon, killing 17 of his entourage, amongst them four of his ministers.

In the United States the Chinese Premier remained neutral on the question of China's participation which, in turn, would bring up the problem of including also the Soviet Union as well as Japan. But Pyongyang objects to additional cross-wise recognition of South Korea by China and the Soviet Union and of North Korea by the USA and Japan, which would enable both Korean states to become members of the United Nations Organisations (the so-called German solution). Washington abstained from negotiating with Pyongyang which was asked by Seoul to begin with talks on a bilateral (Korean) basis; things have recently started to move in this direction.(11) Though a reliable peace might still be far away due to Korea's crucial position in the geo-political strategies of the world's most important states, at least war has not broken out again after the Korean Armistice of 1953. Opposing forces in Korea, as well as in Germany, face each other across dividing lines like the two pointers of a pair of scales, indicating the status of the balance of power between their respective states, regions, and superpowers. These forces are nowadays well restrained by their respective governments to prevent war breaking out by mere accident.

III

In the East Asian - West Pacific Region the USA remains the fore-most non-Asian power since she defeated Japan in 1945 and despite being pushed out of Vietnam in 1975. She has stationed troops not only in South Korea but enjoys also base rights for her Pacific (7th) Fleet and her Air Force in neighbouring Japan and at the Philippine side of the South China Sea. Besides military power she exerts commercial and technological influence.

Washington is urging Japan to assume a greater share of the burden of her own defence, for instance to undertake the defence of the sea lanes toward the South China Sea up to 1,000 nautical miles (= 1,852 km) from the Japanese coast. But despite economic competition, US - Japanese relations are unlikely to worsen because Tokyo is too dependant on its only ally, the USA, for security and trade,(12) and Washing-

ton is too aware of Japan's geographic importance for the regional and world-wide balance of power.

"Nothing underscores the direct interest of the United States in the Asian Pacific region more than two simple facts", said U.S. Foreign Secretary Shultz in an address on "Pacific Tides are Rising":(13)

1) "We trade more to-day with the nations of the Asian Pacific than with any other region on earth,"

2) "We have fought three wars in the Pacific in the last 40 years" (World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War). "We do not want to fight another and this is the reason why the United States will continue a presence there" (we might add: this is the U.S. geo-political and geo-strategic reason...)

The other "nuclear sun" of our globe's planetary power system, the Soviet Union, has built up her naval presence in the West Pacific, following a predominantly military policy in this part of the world and thereby causing apprehension in regional countries outside Vietnamese-controlled Indochina.

Vietnam, which traditionally has been afraid of neighbouring China and has not come to terms with the USA, concluded in 1978 a Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union. At the end of the same year she occupied Cambodia. That, in turn, provoked China "to teach Vietnam a lesson" by a war, limited in space and time, in February-March 1979. But the Soviet Union, though keeping aloof, gained access to the Vietnamese military bases at the South China Sea, Cam Ranh Bay and Danang, which had been the naval and Air Force bases, respectively, of the American forces during the Vietnam War.

Across the South China Sea, in the Philippines, the USA maintains still the Subic naval and Clark Air Force bases; they form part of a string of logistic strongholds from the American East Coast via Hawaii, Guam and Luzon to the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, supporting the US naval presence in the most sensitive strategic area of the Arabian Sea. Three quarters of Japan's oil supply passes through that sea as well as half of Europe's and one third of America's oil supply.

South-East Asia, besides being an island bridge between continental Asia and Australia - New Zealand, has gained special importance as controller of vital sea-lanes between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The Soviet Pacific Fleet, operating from its Siberian ports such as Vladivostok and near-by Nachodka, or Korsakov and Alexandrovsk on Sakhalin Island, or Petropavlovsk on Kamchatka Peninsula, can get

supplied at the tropical coast of the South China Sea. However, when proceeding to the Indian Ocean, the fleet has to pass through one of the straits in South-East Asia.(14) But Soviet aircraft stationed in occupied Afghanistan can relatively easily cover the Arabian Sea and reach out into the Indian Ocean.

Most of the south-east-Asian countries outside Indochina are convinced that the Soviet Union might become dangerous to their region. The present success of the six member states of ASEAN and their continued support by the USA and China have isolated Vietnam and the Soviet Union in South-East Asia because of the Soviet-supported Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. Nevertheless, some ASEAN countries are inclined to assess Vietnam as a useful buffer against a more dominant future China.

China and Vietnam are also in dispute over the delimitation of their 800 mile long land border and the division of the entire Gulf of Tongking. Both countries claim sovereign rights over two offshore island groups in the South China Sea: The Paracels in the north, occupied by PR China in 1974 (after forcing South Vietnamese troops to withdraw), and the numerous Spratlys in the south, occupied either by Vietnam or Malaysia, the Philippines, and Taiwan respectively, yet none of them by PR China.(15) Together with China, the two super-powers USA and Soviet Union form a triangle of world powers around the South China Sea, strategically one of the world's most important inter-ocean basins. What China lacks in super-power she makes up as a littoral power.

Since all three are of global importance we should watch their two geo-political meeting places, the Korean Peninsula and the South China Sea, in a global context. This includes historical experiences, cultural aspects, economic developments, social changes, and - still new - technological break-through.

The modern technological revolution has quite a bearing on that part of the world: There are the challenges and dangers of the global scramble for sea resources and sea space which may be governed by the "United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea" of 1982. Though the text of the Convention, negotiated for nine years, was approved by 130 delegations, it still must be ratified by at least 60 signatory states in order to become binding on them. But many of its provisions have already been accepted by the international community: e.g. "Territorial seas" of up to 12 nautical miles (article 3) and - above all - "Exclusive economic zones" of up to 200 nautical miles giving the coastal states "sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring and exploit-

ing, conserving and managing the natural resources, whether living or non-living, of the waters superjacent to the seabed and of the sea-bed and its subsoil..." (articles 55 ff.). Moreover, coastal states exercise exclusive sovereign rights also over their "Continental shelf" up to 350 nautical miles "for the purpose of exploring it and exploiting the mineral and other non-living resources of the sea-bed and its subsoil..." (articles 76 ff.).

These provisions leave no doubt that even the tiniest islands constitute very valuable assets, since they are surrounded by "Exclusive economic zones"(16) and perhaps are also situated on a "Continental shelf", if not serving as basing points for the establishment of archipelagic zones covering thousands of miles of sea space. By a paradoxical twist of the "Convention on the Law of the Sea", a contest for the numerous disputed islands of the South China Sea (17) seems now - aside from strategic considerations - to be "programmed" for economic reasons.

China's southern maritime frontier looms large as a major factor in her emergence as a world power.(18)

Zusammenfassung

In historischer Sicht bildet der nördliche Teil Ostasiens das geopolitische Gravitationszentrum der ostasiatisch-west-pazifischen Region. Dort stoßen Interessen und Ambitionen sowohl der heutigen Supermächte Amerika und Sowjetunion als auch der Weltgeltung erlangenden Regionalmächte China und Japan unmittelbar aufeinander. Hierunter leidet seit einem Jahrhundert die Halbinsel Korea.

Angesichts der kriegerischen Ereignisse in Indochina seit Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs und des beginnenden Zeitalters technologischer Meeresausbeutung erscheint das Südchinesische Meer mit seinen von den Anrainer-Staaten umstrittenen Inseln und den Militärstützpunkten beider Supermächte geradezu "vorprogrammiert".

Diese südliche Seegrenze Chinas spielt eine bedeutende Rolle beim Aufstieg des "Reiches der Mitte" zur Weltmacht.

Notes

- (1) Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew first used this expression in 1974, the year before the Vietnam war ended, adding that the rising sun of China was "generating heat and influence".

- (2) 1,060 million people (just one thousand million more than in the Federal Republic of (West)Germany!).
- (3) Founded in 1967 by Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines, with the Sultanat of Brunei (on Borneo) joining them in January 1984.
- (4) The first significant use of the term "sphere of influence" was by (Russian Foreign Secretary) Gortchakoff in a letter to (British Foreign Secretary) Clarendon in 1869, declaring that Afghanistan (!) lay outside the Russian sphere of influence (Lord Curzon, "FRONTIERS", Clarendon Press, Oxford/UK 1907).
- (5) John G. Stoessinger, The Might of Nations, New York: Random House, 1982 (7th ed.).
- (6) Treaty of Shimonoseki/Japan, 1895.
- (7) Lasting till 1921 (Washington Conference).
- (8) Two other straits lead out of the Sea of Japan (an "inland sea" for all practical purposes of the Russians):
 - Tsugaru Kaikyo (between Japan's main island Honshu and her northern island Hokkaido)
 - Soya (formerly La Perouse) Strait (between Hokkaido and the Soviet island Sakhalin).
- (9) "The Military Armistice Commission" is composed of five members appointed by each side: The American Commander-in-Chief of the UN Command appointed 1 officer from the USA, 2 from South Korea, 1 from Great Britain and 1 officer on a rotational basis from among the nations still represented in the command; the Communist side has 4 officers from North Korea and 1 from China.
- (10) Which dates her history back to the year 2,333 B.C.(!).
- (11) A test is the question whether Pyongyang will take part in the 1988 Olympic Games to be held in Seoul, after the Soviet Union apparently changed her mind in November 1984 in favour of participation.
- (12) Japan's trade surplus in 1983 = 21.6 billion US \$, January - August 1984 = 24.2 billion US \$ (!).
- (13) 5 March, 1983 at the "World Affairs Council of North California".
- (14) - Malacca (between Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia)
 - Sunda (between the Indonesian islands of Sumatra and Java)
 - Lombok (between the Indonesian islands of Bali and Lombok).
- (15) The Pratas in the north-east near the Hongkong-Manila shipping route are occupied by Taiwan; the Macclesfield Bank in the East consists only of submerged coral reefs which, however, are growing annually by nearly 10 cm.

- (16) Between neighbouring islands the zones are reduced to half-way distance.
- (17) The largest of the 7 major islands in the Paracel archipelago (Woody Island) measures 2.2 sq.km, its highest point stands only 8.5 meter above sea-level; the Paracels are located only 280 km from Hainan Island (China) in the north and 445 km from Danang (Vietnam) in the west. The largest of the islets in the Spratlys (Itu Aba, occupied by Taiwan) measures only 0.4 sq.km (!); this archipelago consists of more than hundred islets, reefs, shoals and sand-banks, stretching ca. 1,000 km from north-east to south-west at a distance of its nearest points from the Philippines = 100 km, from Borneo (Malaysia and Brunei) = 200 km, from Vietnam = 650 km, and from China = 1,000 km.
- (18) Selected bibliography:
Dieter Heinzig, Disputed Islands in the South China Sea, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1976.
Marwyn S. Samuels, Contest for the South China Sea, New York: Methuen & Co. 1982.
Hanns J. Buchholz, Seerechtszonen im Pazifischen Ozean, Hamburg: Institut für Asienkunde 1984.