

Asia's Coming Era of Unpredictability

Why the crisis in Hong Kong and a deterioration in relations between South Korea and Japan are just the beginning of a broader period of flux in Asia.

By Robert D. Kaplan

In 1942, when U.S. marines were engaged in brutal island combat with the Japanese, with no end in sight, Nicholas J. Spykman, a Dutch American strategist who taught at Yale University, foresaw a postwar alliance between the United States and Japan against China, then a critical U.S. wartime ally. Japan, he argued, would be both loyal and useful: It would need the United States to protect the sea lanes so it could import food and oil, while its large population of consumers would form the basis of a strong trade relationship. China, on the other hand, he said, would eventually emerge from the war as a powerful and dangerous continental power, which the United States would need to balance against. Spykman also indicated that Japan would be the equivalent of Great Britain with respect to mainland Asia: a large, offshore ally of the United States.

Spykman, who died of cancer the following year, never lived to see his predictions enacted. In fact, it was a vision that would both define and stabilize Asia, granting it peace and economic prosperity for nearly three-quarters of a century. U.S. President Richard Nixon's opening to China in 1972 put a wrinkle in that vision by moving the United States closer to China in order to balance against the Soviet Union. But the U.S.-Japan alliance nevertheless remained the bedrock of Asian stability. Without America's partnership with Japan, the Nixon administration's diplomatic coup in Beijing could not even have been conceived.

Spykman's vision—so clairvoyant at the time he uttered it—may seem more relevant than ever today amid the ongoing trade spat between Washington and Beijing, even if relatively few today remember his name. Yet Spykman's Asian order is in fact now starting to crumble. This is because Asia in the past decade has undergone remarkable transformation. The changes have been incremental and spread over several countries, so few realize that we are entering a new era—one that will feature a more assertive yet more internally turbulent China, coupled with a fracturing American alliance system and a U.S. Navy that is less dominant than it has been in recent decades. The crisis in Hong Kong and the deterioration of relations between South Korea and Japan are mere prologue to the coming years. Asian security can no longer be taken for granted.

First of all, China is no longer China, at least in the way it was known. The China whose economy grew annually at double digits and that was governed by a group of faceless, risk-averse, and collegial technocrats, held in check by strict term limits, has been replaced by a country ruled by a singular, hardened autocrat overseeing an economy growing at only 6 percent. As the Chinese economy slows down, it is morphing into a more mature system featuring a highly skilled workforce. New middle classes tend to be both nationalistic and hard to satisfy, as they hold government to a higher standard of performance. And Chinese President Xi Jinping is preparing this middle class for world power status, characterized by a command of ports and trade routes stretching across Eurasia, by stoking nationalism and pursuing economic reform. But he is also employing an unprecedented array of technology—including facial scans—to monitor

his people's behavior. Xi knows he needs to be the opposite of Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev—tightening political control instead of loosening it—to reform his over-leveraged, export-driven economy while keeping his country politically intact.

Xi's new China is deploying its rapidly expanding navy throughout the Asian sea lanes, something that will transform the U.S. unipolar maritime security order of the past 75 years in Asia into a multipolar and therefore less stable one. A unipolar naval order had been an implicit key to Spykman's vision of a U.S.-Japanese alliance. But the change to multipolarity is well on its way.

To wit, many observers have had a tendency to view China's naval aggression in the South China Sea and East China Sea as individual developments, to be reported on separately, when in fact they are having an effect on U.S. sea control throughout the Western Pacific. China's latest port development projects in Darwin in northern Australia and near Sihanoukville in Cambodia demonstrate how China is filling up the maritime space at the junction of the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, where it already has a network of ports going back to the previous decade. But it is only in the last few years that China's new maritime empire has come sharply into focus. The Indo-Pacific is no longer a U.S. naval lake.

China's increasing naval activities in both the South and East China seas also serve a larger purpose: They allow China to further threaten Taiwan, which separates the two bodies of water. Before Nixon went to China, Taiwan was a flash point. Had China not gone to war in the Korean Peninsula in 1950, Chinese leader Mao Zedong might have invaded Taiwan instead. But once Nixon and U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger came to an agreement with Mao and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai to effectively delegitimize Taiwan's independent status, while actually doing nothing to threaten it, Taiwan descended into being a mere point of tension. Now it is back as a flash point, with China holding military drills off its coast, even as Beijing has gradually refined its ability to launch missiles and engage in cyberwar against the island, while also demanding that the Trump administration cancel its \$2.2 billion arms sale to Taiwan. All this naturally follows from—and is aggravated by—the combustible mix of both Xi's and U.S. President Donald Trump's policies of nationalistic assertiveness.

Of course, no part of Asia is in play as much as the Korean Peninsula. The unintended consequence of Trump's somewhat confused commencement of talks with North Korea's Kim Jong Un is that the latter and South Korea have jump-started a dialogue of their own. That dialogue will have its own logic and trajectory over time, leading in the direction of a Pyongyang-Seoul peace treaty and the eventual removal of more than 23,000 U.S. troops from South Korea. Don't say it can't happen. Divided-country scenarios in the 20th century had a tendency to end in unity: North and South Vietnam, West and East Germany, North and South Yemen. If this ever happens on the Korean Peninsula, as I've written elsewhere, the principal loser will be Japan.

Japan has required a divided Korean Peninsula for its own security, because a united Greater Korea, precisely because of Tokyo's brutal colonization from 1910 to 1945, to say nothing of the legacy of World War II itself, would instinctively be anti-Japanese. The recent dramatic escalation of trade tensions between South Korea and Japan, itself aggravated by wartime Japan's policy of forced labor and sexual slavery, is but a taste of what political tensions might one day erupt between a newly united Korea and Japan. Indeed, by choosing a policy of zero-sum bilateralism with each Asian country rather than articulating a regional vision, Trump has

opened up a Pandora's box of issues that can set U.S. allies against each other—with China the winner.

Japan must now prepare for a future that features increasingly strengthened Chinese air and sea forces, the possibility of fewer U.S. troops in Northeast Asia, and the ability in the next decade of China to defeat Japan in a war in the East China Sea: China currently bides its time there, unwilling so far to risk a sustained conflict with the extremely capable Japanese navy. This all occurs in the context of a U.S. foreign and security policy that appears less dependable than at any time since World War II. For it is the erosion of constancy in decision-making that most threatens America's reputation for power in Asia and elsewhere.

By turning his back on alliance-building, famously signaled early in his presidency by abrogating the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Trump has weakened the management framework required for inhibiting military escalation at a time of complex interactions between high-end weapons systems across Asia. The mutual confidence and implicit understandings that joined the United States with its allies in Asia have been seriously diluted. Credibility is the most important thing a great power or a person can have.

Washington's new alliance with New Delhi and the emerging Asian power web of ties among India, Australia, Japan, and Vietnam may help less than many think in this regard. U.S.-India relations have dramatically improved over the past 15 years under a specific context: a U.S.-China relationship that, while one of rivals, was predictable and manageable. But the newfound turmoil over tariffs has made the U.S.-China relationship much less predictable or manageable. In that case, India, which is too geographically close to China for comfort, may eventually have to rediscover its nonaligned strategy of balancing between two great powers. This wouldn't take much effort on New Delhi's part and, in fact, would not even have to be formally declared. As for the emerging Asian power web, that is something that is more flashy than substantial: Without firm and predictable U.S. leadership, it may not amount to much.

Long-simmering cultural and economic changes in U.S. society have produced the Trump presidency. And as a great power, the United States' domestic situation ultimately affects the whole world, just as China's domestic situation does. That is to say, only China can defeat China. If Xi's repressive internal policies, aided by technology, fail to prevent a middle-class revolt sometime in the next decade or so, then much of what China has initiated abroad might conceivably be put in question.

But that is still an unlikely scenario. More likely is that China continues to expand both its military reach and domestic market across the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia, while the American people's emotional commitment to their post-World War II alliances continues to fade. In Asia, that translates into Finlandization—an undeclared movement in the direction of the proximate great power. From Japan south to Australia, America's Asian allies may gradually move into the orbit of China the way Finland grew closer to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. U.S. allies have no choice but to make their peace with a China that is the geographic, demographic, and economic organizing principle of the Western Pacific.

In that case, we will see the end of Spykman's world.