

# A New Regional Order

By Terumasa Nakanishi

One thing after another, almost everything that happens today is heralded as a harbinger of major change and transformation. To be sure, the upheavals over the past few years have been breathtaking. The overthrow of dictators, the opening of borders and the other events in Europe seemed to mark the end of the Cold War in 1989. In the Middle East, the Gulf war was fought under the glorious banner of creating a New World Order. There was an almost tangible sense of change.

By contrast, events in Northeast Asia have not been nearly so dramatic. Of course, there is no reason why the whole world should move in synchronous lock-step or even why all change should be for the better. The important thing in looking at the changes in the international situation is to remember that they have been of such a magnitude—of such significance and scale—that they are bound to have ramifications for East Asia and the entire world. Change is inevitable. The only questions are when and what.

## Was Asia first?

In fact, there were changes of global significance in East Asia in the 1980s, even before the changes in Europe. These were not so much political changes as they were economic in nature. The biggest of them was perhaps the start of China's historic open-door economic policies in 1978–1981, yet close behind it was the way South Korea and Taiwan put their economies firmly on the growth path in the early 1980s. This economic-side evolution has slowly but surely altered the political climate and induced fundamental changes in the global order.

Contributing to and further accelerating these changes was then-General Secretary Gorbachev's 1986 Vladivostok speech, which heralded a change in the Soviet approach to Asia even before there had been any notable changes in the Soviet stance in Europe. Like the other

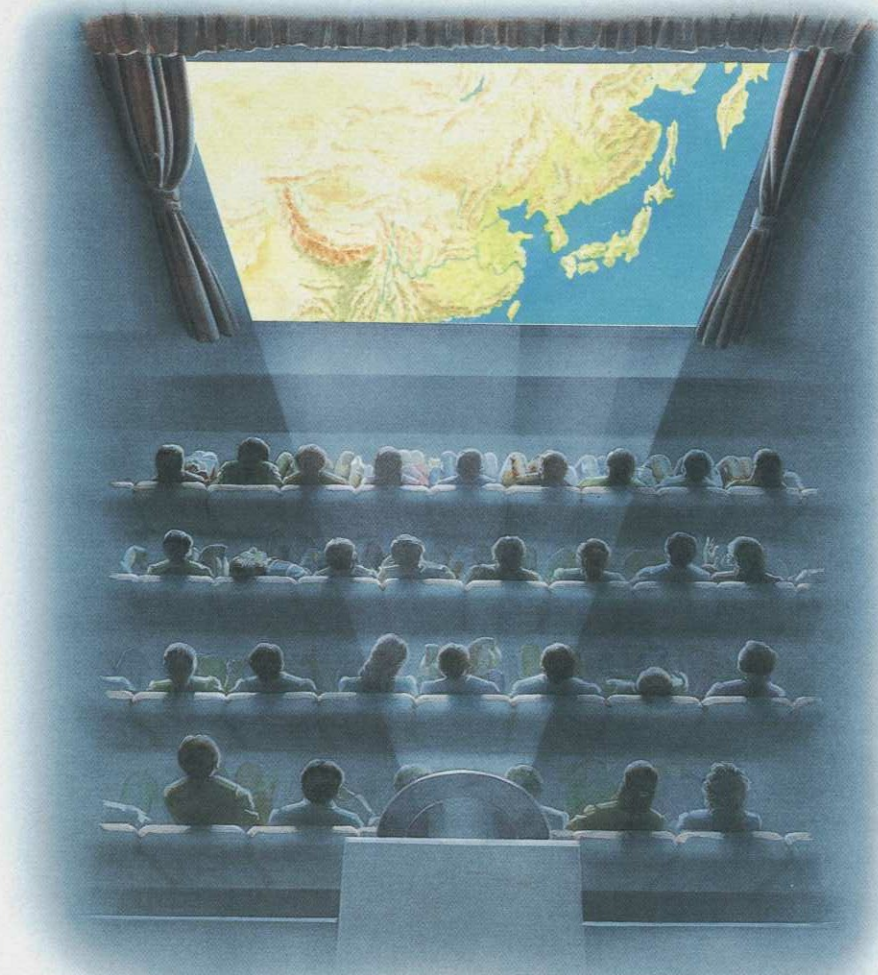






Photo: Nihon Keizai Shimbun

Street scene in the Soviet Far East city of Vladivostok.

changes in Asia, the main motive for this Soviet shift was economic. This later manifested itself as *perestroika* and the "new thinking," but it is important in reading the future for Soviet diplomacy to recognize that the first impetus was economic.

Of course, this first step by the Soviet Union did not have the same dynamism and speed as later changes vis-à-vis Europe, but, as seen in Gorbachev's May 1989 visit to China, the Soviet Union was already making major changes in its relations with China and was hard at work altering the world order even before the reforms in Europe in 1989.

Yet as was repeated in Gorbachev's recent visit to Japan—a visit that produced no dramatic breakthrough on the territorial question and hence no dramatic breakthrough in the bilateral relationship—these Soviet initiatives have generally been very low-key and have not produced the kind of sea changes that shook Europe in 1989. And given the domestic economic troubles that are hobbling the Soviet Union today, it is unlikely that Soviet policy will soon exhibit again the vitality and flair that it showed in the late 1980s.

If we cannot expect the Soviet Union to unleash any new initiatives, the question is then how anxious the countries of Asia are to improve relations with the Soviet Union and what they can do to translate this desire into actual deeds. This is the other key to ending the Cold War in Asia. In this sense, the emerging Japan Sea economic sphere concept can arguably be seen as an effort to breathe new intellectual and political life into the stagnant reforms in the Soviet Union.

For the time being, the initiative has to come and is coming from the Asian side. Except for Japan, whose relations with the Soviet Union are bogged down over the territorial issue, Asian initiatives have sparked both the conspicuous rapprochement between the Soviet Union and China starting coincidental with the Gulf war and the improvement of relations between South Korea and the Soviet Union. Thus it is that expectations are high for the Chinese Communist Party head Jiang Zemin's May visit to the Soviet Union.

Yet it is important not to get to caught up in the Western sense of crisis—a sense of crisis epitomized by the somewhat exaggerated view that posits a crumbling of the Soviet Union—and to recognize that the reformist course in the Soviet Union will continue basically unchanged and that *perestroika* will continue to have a world-class impact of first-rate historical significance once the present difficulties in the Soviet Union are over. For what it is worth, I believe there will be a soft landing in the Soviet Union's situation in the next two or three years.

## Differences from the European order

Having started first in Asia, these changes were then accelerated by the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the Malta Summit marking the end of the Cold War, with the wave of reform bouncing back off Europe and reverberating in East Asia louder than anyone expected, including the rapprochement between South Korea and the Soviet Union that started in San Francisco in June 1990 and continued on to the establishment

of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

As though spurred on by these developments, North Korea has also made overtures to Japan and the two countries have opened negotiations on the establishment of diplomatic relations; China and South Korea have established consular relations; and North Korea and the United States have begun reviewing their past policies and exploring new modalities for their bilateral relationship.

At the April 1991 summit meeting on Cheju, the Soviet Union even proposed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with South Korea (a treaty which could even be construed as signaling a political alliance of sorts between the two countries). The Cold War structure on the Korean Peninsula has clearly started to collapse. Yet the most difficult issue remains—that of the dialogue between the North and the South. How will the North react to the possibility of South Korea's joining the United Nations? This summer is sure to be historically crucial for the peninsula.

Despite the apparent similarities of change, the structure of international relations in Asia remains fundamentally different from that in Europe, and thus

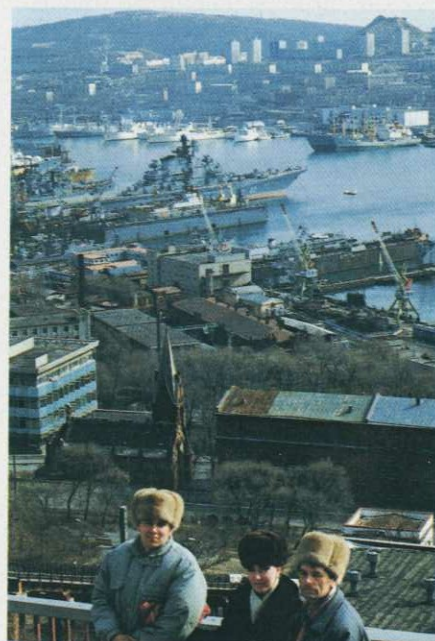


Photo: Nihon Keizai Shimbun

The port of Vladivostok in the Soviet Far East, where its Pacific Fleet is based.



the process of breaking down Cold War barriers and achieving an overall improvement is necessarily different in Asia from what it is in Europe. The biggest factor here, of course, is China, as the Chinese dance adds a complicating element to the Asian scene that is not present in Europe.

While the early 1980s may be characterized by the worsening of Cold War tensions in Europe over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the deployment of medium-range ballistic missiles, it was a time of lessening tensions in Asia as China moved to adopt more open economic policies. On the other hand, 1989, which was celebrated as marking the end of the Cold War in Europe, was a year of greater tension in East Asia with the repercussions of Tiananmen. While Europe and the United States were rejoicing over the "liberation" of Eastern Europe in 1990, Northeast Asia was beset with anxiety over developments in China.

Yet just as there was a heightening of tensions in the United States, Europe and the Middle East with the outbreak of the Gulf crisis in August 1990, the Chinese situation once more turned more relaxed and domestic stability was improved with the hosting of the Asian Games and the progress made in improving relations with Japan.

## Japan-U.S. relations as a factor

One more major factor that differentiates the situation in Northeast Asia from that in Europe is the existence of the Japan-U.S. relationship. This relationship, which seems similar to that between the United States and Europe in that it is an alliance that functioned effectively to deter Soviet intentions throughout the Cold War years, is thought unlikely to change in any major way immediately upon the global collapse of Cold War structures. While there may be room for argument about whether there are structural reasons for this permanence beyond the end of the Cold War or whether this is just the way things look at present, there is nothing in Japan's present geostrategic situation to indicate that the Japan-U.S.



Soviet President Gorbachev's visit to Cheju in April to meet his South Korean counterpart Roh Tae Woo symbolized warming relations between the two countries.

security alliance will, like NATO, become less significant militarily.

In this connection, the "Strategic Framework for the Pacific Rim" report released by the U.S. administration in April 1990 remains representative of U.S. thinking toward the region. Yet even this report says there are many uncertainties

and that it will be necessary to review the situation again in 1993-1994 before the U.S. military presence in Asia can be scaled down.

Nonetheless, it remains possible that there could be radical changes in the role played by the Japan-U.S. alliance if there were conspicuous progress in Japan-



North Korea's President Kim Il Sung (center) with senior Japanese politicians Shin Kanemaru (left) of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party and Makoto Tanabe of the main opposition Social Democratic Party during their visit to Pyongyang last September.



Soviet relations, beginning with the resolution of the territorial issue, and if the situation on the Korean Peninsula were sharply improved by major changes in North Korea's relations with Japan and the United States. The other side of this, of course, is that, no matter how much may be said and written about the end of the Cold War, there will be no fundamental change in the Japan-U.S. relationship unless there are basic changes in the strategic political and economic context governing the relationship.

Indeed, the Japan-U.S. relationship is unlikely to feel the effects of developments in the international strategic situation until the last bastions of the Cold War structures have been eliminated in this region, and the relationship is far more influenced by changes in the international economic order, including the global trading system and the drift to economic blocs, and by such bilateral factors as economic friction. In that sense, the Japan-U.S. relationship has an impact on East Asia separate and apart from the currents in the Cold War or the international situation in general.

Yet given this flux in Japan-U.S. relations, there is a very good chance that the U.S. presence in East Asia will be subject to a thorough policy review in 1993-1994 in light of changes in the international situation, and the two major factors in this review will be (i) the degree to which the Cold War context has been altered in Asia, and (ii) what progress has been made in revitalizing the U.S. economy.

## Long-term perspective needed

While it is very difficult to place the current changes along the broad spectrum of valid possibilities, it can at least be said that the changes in the late 1980s—whether they originated in Europe or in Asia and whether they appeared progressive or retrogressive—have the potential for triggering major changes in the longer term. They are bound to have an impact sooner or later, even though this impact may be hobbled and delayed by immediate conditions.

The only question is what kind of a



Soviet President Gorbachev shows visiting General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Jiang Zemin the way to the conference table. Jiang's visit to Moscow in May together with Gorbachev's 1989 visit to China symbolize an improvement in bilateral relations.

time frame should be posited for these changes. In these last two years of historic change, including the Tiananmen incident and the Gulf war—both of which were superpower power plays running counter to the historical trend toward a more multipolar world—there have been a number of developments that have obscured these changes and have even tended to negate their impact.

While it is postulated that the New World Order will be a U.N.-centered global order that will transcend, overwhelm, and hence erode the importance of regions, I suspect that this is only true of the New World Order in its most superficial manifestation as taken up and given such play in the media. The New World Order in the Middle East, for example, is already rapidly sinking into the quagmire of desert politics. The concept of a post-Gulf order—the widely accepted idea that events running counter to history can have a lasting impact on the international order—is an intellectual impediment to any attempt to think clearly and realistically about Northeast Asia's future.

Not only in the United States and Europe but all over the world, many people thought, even if only temporarily, that

the Gulf war would somehow result in a New World Order. This fancy was spurred on by a clamor for international cooperation and contributions as each country sought to gain advantage in the yet-aborning and hence undefined international order by taking an active part in wars and other preening displays of force. In fact, the rush to embrace the New World Order betrayed, at best, a certain naivete or innocence, for international coercion or (depending on conditions) war lurks just below the surface, and these lofty words are simply an effort to get as many countries as possible to buy into a tired old framework repackaged as a New World Order.

It is essential that Northeast Asia pay closer attention to the region's distinctive features and concentrate on building a New Regional Order grounded in peaceful coexistence and coming to terms with our history—a New Regional Order based not on any arbitrary idea of right or justice but rather on open cooperative relations that are truly to everyone's benefit.

*Terumasa Nakanishi is professor of international relations at the University of Shizuoka in Shizuoka City.*