

ON THE CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION SURROUNDING THE KOREAN PENINSULA

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Abstract. This article deals with the geopolitical developments happening in the region and the world. The current war in Ukraine has direct implications for political processes in the Republic of Korea and the DPRK and the foreign policies of the two Korean states. The ongoing transformation in the current world order has a profound effect on Central Asian states as well. In this regard, it is important to follow and analyze the events on the Korean Peninsula, which have practical implications for the countries of the Central Asia region.

Keywords: *Korean Peninsula, Central Asia, geopolitics, competition between the US and China, war in Ukraine, “multivector” policy, active neutrality.*

КОРЕЙ ТҮБЕГІНДЕГІ БҮГІНГІ ГЕОСАЯСИ ЖАҒДАЙ ТУРАЛЫ

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Аңдатпа. Мақалада аймақтағы және әлемдегі геосаясатқа қатысты мәселелер қарастырылады. Украинадағы соғыстың Корея Республикасы мен КХДР - дегі саяси үрдістер мен осы екі корей мемлекетінің сыртқы саясатына тікелей ықпалы бар. Әлемдегі тәртіптің трансформациялануы Орта Азия елдеріне де әсер етеді. Сондықтан Корей түбегіндегі жағдайға сараптама жасау біз үшін практикалық тұрғыдан маңызды іс.

Түйінді сөздер: *Корей түбегі, Орталық Азия, геосаясат, АҚШ пен ҚХР арасындағы бәсеке, Украинадағы соғыс, көпвекторлы саясат, белсенді бейтараптық.*

О ТЕКУЩЕЙ ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ СИТУАЦИИ НА КОРЕЙСКОМ ПОЛУОСТРОВЕ

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Аннотация. В данной статье рассматриваются геополитические события, происходящие в регионе и мире. Нынешняя война в Украине имеет прямое влияние на политические процессы в Республике Корея и КНДР, а также на внешнюю политику двух корейских государств. Продолжающаяся трансформация нынешнего мирового порядка оказывает глубокое влияние и на государства Центральной Азии. В этой связи важно следить и анализировать события на Корейском полуострове, имеющие практическое значение для стран Центральноазиатского региона.

Ключевые слова: *Корейский полуостров, Центральная Азия, геополитика, конкуренция между США и КНР, война в Украине, многовекторная политика, активный нейтралитет.*

Introduction

The Korean Peninsula is a clear example of how geopolitics determines the fate and behavior of states.

The Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the DPRK (North Korea) were formed due to the ideological and geopolitical confrontation between the two systems after World War II. During the Cold War, geopolitics strongly influenced the formation and development of these two states.

Due to the geopolitical situation on the peninsula, and despite the great difference in the demographic, economic, financial, scientific, and technological potential of the two countries (in favor of Seoul), the tough confrontation on the peninsula persists to this day. The war in Ukraine and escalating tensions in the Middle East have significantly aggravated the situation on the Korean peninsula.

It should be noted that the two Korean states are not major geopolitical players. Therefore, they are members of respective groups in the conflict between two ideological blocs, which is the essence of global geopolitics.

Therefore, the article focuses mainly on the geopolitical aspect of the situation around the Korean Peninsula.

The war in Ukraine triggered a chain reaction that caused enormous changes in the global world order. There is a process of deepening confrontation between blocs and state systems. The conflict threatens not only the direct participants of the war in Ukraine. Current tectonic shifts affect the situation in the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) and on the Korean peninsula.

In the foreseeable future, the place and role of the states of the so-called “Global South”, including the countries of Central Asia, will depend on their reaction to these changes.

In the 1990s, Kazakhstan established diplomatic relations with both Koreas. At that time, there was hope that Pyongyang would take the course of reform. However, that didn't happen. Now it is carrying out secret and illegal military programs. Kazakhstan consistently opposes the DPRK's nuclear missile program and advocates denuclearization of this country. In general, there are no close contacts between the countries for many reasons, including the closure of the DPRK.

Astana and Seoul have been able to establish trusting and very productive relations. In the context of the war in Ukraine, there is a growing interest in Kazakhstan on the part of political, business, and academic circles of the "country of morning calm". Recently, several Korean firms have moved their offices and production lines to Kazakhstan.

In June this year, the President of the Republic of Korea paid a very productive visit to three Central Asian countries (Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan). Specific and serious agreements were reached in many areas, especially in the economy.

In particular, in Kazakhstan, the South Korean side will build energy facilities, develop lithium, actively work in the banking sector, etc. More importantly, sustainable ties are being established in technology (e.g., drones), education and science (in particular, the leading Korean institute KAIST plans to open its Central Asian branch in Almaty).

An important political outcome of the negotiations in the capitals of Central Asian states is the launch of a new format of interaction. Thus, a "Korea-Central Asia" summit is planned for May-June 2025 in the capital of South Korea. In particular, Seoul intends to intensify cooperation with our region by implementing the "K - Silk Road" initiative (Korea - Silk Road countries), which prescribes specific directions of multilateral cooperation in priority areas.

As Seoul is a global player in the fields of economy, science and technology, etc., it is important for Kazakhstan to maintain and increase close relationships between states. This is important for South Korea as well. For Seoul, Kazakhstan and the CA region are important subjects of international relations, which will grow and develop dynamically in the near future. In addition, the region has the resources that are necessary for the economic and national security of South Korea.

Therefore, it is very important to regularly monitor the situation around the Korean Peninsula, which is the focus of this article.

Methodology

In writing this article, quantitative methods, analysis and comparison were used. This includes the study of statistical data on development, reports of international organizations and specialized multilateral institutions, scientific articles in the field of geopolitics, issues of war and peace, economics, trade, technology, finance, education and science, and diplomacy. The main emphasis was placed on the problems of geopolitics, strategic stability and security.

Research results and discussions

Situation on the Korean Peninsula

The Korean peninsula has always been characterized by a particular volatility. Here we can limit ourselves to mentioning the fact that during World War II (WWII) it was decided to divide the peninsula into two parts. After the end of World War II, the first major conflict between the two blocs took place on the peninsula (Korean War, 1950-1953).

Despite the fact that after the collapse of the USSR came a period that was called by the American scientist Francis Fukuyama "the end of history", those changes did not directly affect the peninsula. Here, the Cold War, that is, geopolitical confrontation, persisted, and it continues to this day. It should be added that the hot phase of the war stopped after the parties signed the Korean Armistice Agreement (1953).

There are clear indications that the situation has become much more acute in recent years. In the 1990s, Pyongyang decided to acquire its own nuclear shield to ensure its own security. At that time, Russia and China (PRC) were preoccupied with the problems of reform and economic modernization. In particular, for the purposes of modernization and development, they implemented economic projects that were beneficial to themselves, including those involving Western companies. Beijing gradually became Pyongyang's main trade and economic partner, taking the place of the USSR.

War in Ukraine. Geopolitical alliances and blocs

The following factors significantly influenced the aggravation of confrontation on the peninsula:

1. Annexation of Crimea. The war in Donbass (2014). Open full-scale war in Ukraine, which began in February 2022.

2. Deepening distrust and growing global strategic competition between the US and the PRC, between the West and the “bloc of authoritarian countries”.

Amid the war in Ukraine, Seoul, Tokyo, and other allies and partners of Washington in the Indo-Pacific region have undertaken a series of urgent measures and activities that have rallied their ranks.

The cornerstone of strategic security and stability of the IPR, economic well-being and development of such countries as South Korea and Japan for the last seventy years has been the significant U.S. military presence on their territory.

Actions of the DPRK. The DPRK continues to build up its nuclear missile program in defiance of the adopted UN Security Council resolutions. Apparently, it is aimed not only at “threats” from the US, South Korea and Japan. It is intended to ensure DPRK's security along all perimeters of its borders.

In the conditions of the war in Ukraine, S. Korea is pursuing a line of intensification of contacts in the military sphere. This is not only due to considerations of allied or partnership relations. Since the military-industrial complex is a key sector of the DPRK economy, the export of arms, equipment and ammunition brings good economic dividends. Such revenues are also necessary for the continuation of secret military programs.

Policies of Seoul. South Korea is a presidential republic. President Yoon Suk-yeol is seeking international status for his country at the level of a “global pivotal state” (global pivotal state, [1]).

Seoul is not only relying on its increased and significant economic and military capabilities. In the face of Pyongyang's growing nuclear missile threat and rising geopolitical tensions in the region, South Korea has been forced to take the following measures to further strengthen its military-political alliance with Washington and Tokyo.

1. From the outset, the conservative government of President Yoon Suk-yeol (who came to power in May 2022) has made clear its intention to prioritize strengthening its military-political alliance with Washington.

2. Along with this, mutual grievances in relations with Tokyo (mainly “historical issues”) were overcome as soon as possible.

3. Bilateral and trilateral summits were held (the meeting at Camp David in August 2023 was particularly effective). In parallel, there was a significant deterioration in the emotional background and quality of Seoul's relations with Moscow and Beijing (to a lesser extent).

President Yoon Suk-yeol's administration continues to strengthen its partnership with the EU and NATO. This is only due to the need to assist Kiev. In the current geopolitical realities, it is important for Seoul to strengthen its defense capabilities and economic engagement with all developed democracies and their alliances.

Career diplomat Cho Tae-yul, who was appointed as South Korea's foreign minister in January 2024, shared his vision of the situation and his role as the country's foreign minister during a parliamentary hearing.

First of all, in his opinion, “the international order is undergoing seismic changes” today, where “geopolitical landscape trending toward the formation of liberal and authoritarian blocs” [2].

Secondly, “It is a new geopolitical environment where economics, security and technology are interconnected, leading to an inevitable change in the environment where countries sharing constitutional values and values of liberal democracy ultimately see their national interests aligning”. “The world is gradually transitioning into a jungle where the logic of power dominates”. In this context, Minister Cho noted “we should handle relations with China based on the principle of not undermining the Korea-US alliance” [2].

Seoul has to conduct its policy toward Russia “in a stable manner based on principles and standards that align with national interests and values.” The minister does not see any opportunities to improve them in the near future. In Cho Tae-yeol's opinion, due to the current circumstances, restoring relations with Moscow in the future will require enormous efforts.

On April 10, 2024, South Korea held parliamentary elections in which the opposition managed to retain a majority of seats in the National Assembly.

However, the opposition's victory does not mean that the president has completely lost the opportunity to advance his agenda, especially in the international arena. Regardless of the outcome of the elections, the country will continue to strengthen its military-political alliance with Washington.

Washington's policy. President Joe Biden's administration is emphasizing the development of an alliance relationship with Seoul. He visited South Korea on May 20-22, 2022 (i.e. 11 days after the inauguration of President Yoon Suk-yeol). This is related to the fact that the previous President Moon Jae-in (a representative of another political camp, which advocates a “more balanced relations” with all neighbors, especially with the DPRK and the PRC) was not particularly active.

“Conservative” (who are primarily in favor of a strong military-political alliance with the U.S.) Yoon Suk-yeol during his election campaign openly stated the need, together with the U.S., to counter not only threats from the DPRK but also Beijing's very ambitious aspirations in the IPR [3].

President Joe Biden managed to hold several productive summits with the new leader of South Korea in a short period. He also organized the first trilateral summit with the leaders of the U.S., South Korea, and Japan in 12 years (August 18, 2023, Camp David, [4].

In July 2024, the U.S. hosted a NATO summit, to which the leaders of South Korea and Japan were invited [5]. In October this year. Four Indo-Pacific states will attend the NATO Defense Ministers' Meeting for the first time.

Japan. In recent years, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (Shigeru Ishiba was elected the 102nd Prime Minister of Japan on October 2 this year) has implemented several measures that have led to an increase in Japan's role and status in international

affairs. This is evidenced by the results of his recent visit to the United States. The main outcome is that Tokyo has now become a "global partner" of Washington. Within the framework of the visit, concrete agreements were reached that will contribute to uniting the efforts of the two economic giants, including in the field of artificial intelligence and semiconductors, defense industry (submarine project), quantum mechanics and others. Shigeru Ishiba intends to continue this line.

Strengthening of cooperation in the sphere of economy and technology is also observed in the US relations with South Korea [6]. US President Joe Biden, supported by Democrats in Congress (bipartisan consensus was also reached on some legislation), is implementing several economic measures aimed at developing and attracting modern high-tech industries and "quality" jobs in the USA. Leading South Korean companies are taking a very active part in them. Of particular importance is the cooperation between the two sides in semiconductor and chip manufacturing, electric vehicles (EVs), and other high-tech goods (total: six priority areas).

The PRC factor. Beijing also faces difficult tasks. If we talk about external problems, they include the war in Ukraine; strategic rivalry with Washington; trade wars (primarily with the U.S. and the EU); the consequences of the pandemic, etc. The Chinese government is also facing some challenges.

As for internal processes, the PRC development is negatively affected by the crisis in the real estate sector (which, according to various estimates, accounts for approximately 1/3 of China's GDP and 60% of Chinese household assets), the decline in FDI and Chinese exports, youth unemployment and others.

According to Asia Society [7]: in the foreseeable future, China's GDP growth will not exceed 4% (which is objectively low for a "developing country").

The problem of the middle-income trap is also very urgent for Beijing, which requires serious reforms to overcome.

In its industrial development, the PRC has to some extent followed the model successfully tested earlier by Japan and South Korea (i.e., so-called "export-oriented development"). Since the PRC is larger than these two countries combined, this model is flawed for both China and the world. Therefore, further rapid growth requires not only measures to increase domestic consumption but also specific reforms that will strengthen such attributes necessary for a more developed society as an open society and protect the rights and freedoms of citizens (including entrepreneurs).

The Communist Party of China has set very ambitious goals for the country. In particular, in the defense sphere, the PRC intends to become the "preeminent" military power in Asia.

In today's realities, Seoul needs to reduce its excessive trade dependence on the PRC, as it allows Beijing to exert significant pressure (there are many examples) on Seoul's behavior in the external and internal arenas.

In this regard, South Korea has taken active measures in recent years to ensure its "supply chain security", including in the area of "strategic resources".

Of strategic importance to Seoul is the semiconductor manufacturing sector, where South Korean firms play an important global role. It is known that Washington has imposed controls on the supply of equipment and advanced chips to the PRC.

In general, Seoul does not see China as an imminent current threat (imminent challenge). Washington and its allies in the region view the PRC as a potential "strategic threat" in the medium- and long term.

However, the situation around Taiwan is of serious concern to all states in the region. Seoul experts tend to link the further development of the situation around Taiwan with the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

Speaking at the 60th Munich Security Conference (2024), China's high representative repeatedly reiterated Beijing's position on “the need to avoid competition” and that “it is important for major powers to learn to coexist peacefully and develop mutual trade”. Undoubtedly, Beijing “will protect its national interests.

The general statements of China's leaders and its foreign policy initiatives since the beginning of the war in Ukraine suggest that Beijing intends to maintain its strategic line without much revision. To be more precise, after the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China (October 2022), Beijing has already softened its rhetoric in relations with the United States and the West in general.

Russian Policy. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, South Korea has demonstrated its commitment to the democratic and liberal values of the West and condemned the aggression together with its allies.

Now there are no direct flights between the countries, economic contacts are minimized (for instance, gas deliveries under previously signed contracts are carried out).

In the foreseeable future, Seoul will be in favor of a military-political alliance with Washington and the preservation of the U.S. military presence on its territory. This is the foundation of the country's prosperity and a guarantee of its national security.

Military sphere

At the end of February 2024, Carlos Del Toro (US Secretary of the Navy) visited South Korea. During his stay, he visited the shipyard of Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI) and Hanwha Ocean (HHO). Washington intends to increase the capacity and capability of its presence in Asia. These military infrastructure facilities are important for the maintenance of U.S. warships directly in the region.

Carlos Del Toro also familiarized himself with the construction progress of a South Korean Aegis-equipped destroyer (to track and intercept missiles) and a modern Korean Chongnam-class frigate.

In 2022, HHI, having signed a Master Ship Repair Agreement with the U.S. military, opened a marine logistics service center in the Philippines. At this time, the company is also busy producing patrol ships and frigates for Manila's military needs.

During the visit to HHO, the U.S. representative familiarized himself with the construction of the South Korean submarine JangBogo KSS III Batch-I. Following the visit, the U.S. military officer met with South Korean Defense Minister Kim Won-shik, during which the parties agreed “that defense industry collaboration is vital for reinforcing the naval strength of both nations by ensuring supply chain stability and improving joint operational efforts” [8].

Another important development was the recent decision by the U.S. Department of Defense to begin work to sign a new special agreement with South Korea on defense procurement (RDP, Reciprocal Defense Procurement Agreement). It goes in line with the agreements reached by the presidents of the two countries in April 2023 (during the April summit Washington and Seoul decided to strengthen the stability of supply chains in the military sphere by signing a special agreement - RDP Agreement).

Specialists often refer to the RDP Agreement as the “Military Free Trade Agreement” because it aims to reduce trade barriers and increase bilateral trade in this “sensitive” area [9].

It should be added that in November last year, the parties also signed a Security of Supply Agreement, which allows a counterparty to make a "special request" on a priority basis in order to expedite the delivery (receipt) of military goods.

All these joint agreements and measures in the military-political and economic sphere demonstrate the following:

1. The U.S. and South Korea, responding to current problems (primarily the war in Ukraine), are preparing for threats directly in the Indo-Pacific region.

2. The growth of economic potential allows Seoul to take an increasingly clear and unambiguous position in ideological issues as well. Recently, one can increasingly hear Seoul's statements about the need to protect democratic values, freedoms and human rights in the face of the growing threat from authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

The NATO factor. In recent years, South Korea has significantly intensified its engagement with NATO. In particular, President Yoon has personally participated in NATO summits. South Korean representatives regularly participate in the work of the Ramstein Group (although Seoul does not provide significant military assistance to Kyiv).

In other words, NATO is not only strengthening after Finland and Sweden joined but also expanding its interaction with countries far beyond the organization's "area of responsibility".

This interaction is not limited only to the sphere of security and defense. Seoul is interested in economic and trade cooperation. In recent years, there has been an increase in high-level exchanges. Thus, President Yoon has made several visits to European countries in a short period. Here it is enough to limit ourselves to stating the data that the GDP of NATO countries is more than 50% of the world's GDP [10]. The budget of NATO countries (\$1.34 trillion in 2023) is 55% of the defense budget of all countries in the world [11].

As Seoul is a global exporter and intends to play an important role in the arms market as well, President Yoon's administration is taking an active line in this area as well.

For its part, NATO is looking for new partners in other regions, especially in the growing Indo-Pacific region. Geopolitics and current global issues such as cybercrime, climate, space, new technologies, etc. are coming to the fore.

Here I would like to say a few words about the OSCE. Ukraine and Russia are members of this organization. We see that in the current confrontation not only the basic principles of the UN Charter but also the principles of "comprehensive and cooperative security" of the OSCE have been violated. This situation cannot but worry us as well, since the Central Asian states are also full members of the Organization [12].

Conclusion

At present, the world is witnessing rivalry and struggle between geopolitical blocs.

In such a situation, Central Asian states need to maintain a multi-vector foreign policy. The war in Ukraine and the current conflict between "West" and "East" may have a protracted character.

Historically, our region prospered when borders were open for exchange and trade on the Silk Roads.

Therefore, in the challenging geopolitical environment, CA countries need to pursue a policy of "active neutrality". Undoubtedly, it is difficult to repeat the role of Finland or Austria during the Cold War during the new confrontation. Nevertheless, it is important for Kazakhstan to maintain a balance and continue to use both: "active" and "neutrality".

The essence of "active neutrality", in our understanding, is as follows:

1. Kazakhstan cannot behave like Turkmenistan. Its neutrality has turned out to be passive, and the country has practically closed itself off from the outside world. Kazakhstan has a different geographical location and geopolitical environment.

2. Kazakhstan actively participates in the work of such organizations (forums, projects) as CICA, CSTO, EAEC, SCO, "One Belt and One Road", etc. Therefore, "active neutrality" is also beneficial for all our neighbors.

3. Even if Western sanctions are not a threat, Kazakhstan faces the task of ensuring the dynamic socio-economic development of the country.

Kazakhstan needs active neutrality in politics and no less active involvement in the economic processes of the region and the world.

This is due to the fact that in the new geopolitical conditions development, security, and technology are interconnected. Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries need to maintain access to modern technologies and systems.

Competition between global powers can bring us both harm and benefit. It is important for Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries to maintain access to modern technologies and systems. Therefore, in these difficult times, these countries need to maintain room for their maneuver. Without this, it is difficult to ensure the dynamic development of the state.

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