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A View from Tokyo on Regional Politico-Military Developments
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Dear Readers,

Due to the the recent series of important politico-military developments including the Russian annexation of Crimea and US President Obama's visit to Tokyo, Seoul, KL and Manila, we decided to postpone the publication of our first EASQ of 2014. Many apologies in advance for this regrettable but inevitable delay.

Since February 2014, Russia's invasion and annexation of Crimea has dominated the world's, including US, attention. Russia's open defiance of the international community despite economic sanctions raised serious concern on whether the international community can respond to the violation of international law effectively through diplomatic and economic punitive measures when the other party does not hesitate to use military force to enforce its will and change the status quo. In particular, US hesitance to take punitive measures that go beyond economic sanctions has made US allies and friends around the world question whether US will indeed stand by them if their territorial integrity is threatened.

In Asian context, Crimea's annexation and the hesitance of US to even discuss military response triggered a debate about what lessons China might have learned from the recent Russian experience. To the US allies in particular, the absence of US' firm response to Russia's de facto military invasion raises serious concern about the credibility of US commitment to their defense.

In Northeast Asia, tensions between Japan, South Korea, and China continue. Even US-Japan relations have suffered a cooling of the relationship following Prime Minister Abe's visit to Yasukuni Shrine on December 26, 2013. US frustration with the diplomatic complications, that

Abe's shrine visit has caused for US' Asia policy, led to a US Embassy statement expressing "disappointment" for Abe's action which, in turn, triggered anti-US reaction by some minority in Japan who are also Abe supporters. There was a sea change when Abe administration expressed the intention not to revise the 1993 Kono Statement prior to the US-Japan-Korea Summit Meeting in the Hague, where Abe clearly tried to be conciliatory towards South Korea. Still, although US, Japan, and ROK seemed to have agreed to focus on their shared concern about North Korea when their leaders met in the Hague, it remains to be seen whether the three countries can continue to keep their eyes on the ball.

In the first four months of 2014, the Obama administration has begun a series of high-level engagement in the Asia-Pacific. In March, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel met with all 10 ASEAN leaders for US-ASEAN Defense Forum in Hawaii—the first meeting in the US of its kind. Hagel then went onto his Asia tour during which he explicitly said the Senkaku Islands are included in US treaty obligation under Article 5 of the US-Japan Mutual Security Treaty. This led to a testy exchange during his visit to Beijing. President Obama's much anticipated Asia trip followed shortly thereafter. "Reassurance" is the key word for these high-level visits, but it is unclear whether the Obama administration has been able to accomplish that goal.

We hope you will find this short overview and the following analyses of Northeast Asian security developments helpful.

<Tokyo - Obama's State Visit>

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Yasukuni Shrine on December 26 2013 greatly affected Abe's foreign policy priorities during this period. Criticism from South Korea and China was intense, but it was entirely expected. However, Abe administration seems to have been caught by surprise by US reaction, which was demonstrated by unprecedented issuance of the statement by the US Embassy in Tokyo, arguably representing the views of the White House, to express US "disappointment". The visit intensified the debate that had been already ongoing in Washington regarding the reliability of Mr. Abe. At minimum, many in Washington agree that Abe's visit to Yasukuni Shrine has shrunk his diplomatic options particularly in Northeast Asia, which will negatively affect US interests in Asia.

Such US reaction, in turn, caused a great deal of frustration here in Tokyo. Many felt that US reaction completely disregarded a number of important achievements by the Abe administration to make Japan a more "normal" country, including the establishment of National Security Council, the release of Japan's first-ever National Security Strategy, the revision of National Defense Program Guidelines and the Mid-Term Defense Program, the

enactment of the Specified Classified Information Protection Act, the approval by Okinawan Governor Nakaima for the landfill in Hennoko, and the revision of Three Principles of Arms Exports. Worse, some in Tokyo even began to argue that the political orientation of the Obama administration (a Democratic administration) was the cause of the misunderstanding with the United States, implying that a Republican administration would have been more understanding of Abe's action. Of course, few in Washington, Republicans and democrats alike, appreciated such an argument in Tokyo and understood the domestic political reasons for Abe's shrine visit. In short, a serious perception gap emerged following Abe's Yasukuni visit, and the gap was widening.

In this context, President Obama's trip, from Japanese perspective, was expected to achieve three things. First and foremost, the trip was hoped to re-establish the personal relationship between Obama and Abe. Secondly, Japan looked to President Obama to explicitly reaffirm US commitment to help Japan defend the Senkaku Islands based on Article 5 of US-Japan Security Treaty. Thirdly, some in Japan hoped that US and Japan would be able to bridge enough gap in the bilateral negotiation toward trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) to announce something positive at the conclusion of Abe-Obama meeting.

During his state visit—the first time in 18 years for a US president—Obama seemed to have given what Japanese wanted on security issues. He clearly said that the Senkaku Islands are covered under Article 5 of US-Japan Security Treaty, not only in his written interview with Yomiuri Shimbun and his joint press conference with Abe, but also in the official joint statement. He also endorsed many elements of Abe's security policy, including the discussion on the right of collective self-defense. He even met the families of the abductees while in Japan. Although some question how genuinely Obama enjoyed late-night sushi dinner with Prime Minister Abe upon his arrival in Japan, his business-like relationship with Abe also seemed to be back on track. Although no agreement was announced on TPP, there was a breakthrough. It is reported that US and Japan, after many rounds of intense negotiation, have finally bridged the gap on major contentious issue, including automobiles and agriculture.

Despite Abe's difficult domestic political judgment on TPP, many in Washington, many of whom are doubtful of Abe's ability to initiate effective "Third Arrow" for his economic policy, question what he gave Obama in return. They are particularly critical of Obama leaving Japan without a clear agreement on TPP. Some also point out the Obama's noticeable discomfort during the press conference when Abe, in response to a question by a US reporter on history issue, argued that his visit to Yasukuni Shrine last year was to renew his personal pledge to ensure that Japan will continue to be a peace-loving nation. Clearly, there is an atmosphere in

Washington that questions whether Obama's visit to Tokyo was a successful one or not, from US standpoint.

<Washington – domestic politics>

The Obama administration and Congress broke the deadlock over US federal budget in December 2013 by reaching a two-year budget deal. This agreement has brought much-awaited sense of stability in US federal budgeting, a development certainly welcome by the Pentagon.

However, President Obama's approval rating has hit a new low over the problems associated with the launching of so-called "Obamacare," a federal insurance system.

The CBS News opinion poll conducted on December 5-8, 2013 indicates that 50% of the respondents did not support President Obama. This poll also indicates that 63% of the respondents felt that the country was moving in the "wrong direction." What is probably most worrisome for President Obama and his close advisors is that this poll shows two new trends. First, the poll showed that the more people (44% disapprove vs. 42% approve) did not approve President Obama's foreign policy—the area he has done consistently well. More importantly, the percentage of those who did not think they could trust President Obama hit the highest at 46% since 2009. Throughout his presidency, Obama has consistently scored high in this "trustability" question even though the voters have been divided over his policy initiatives.

Obama's domestic political standing got worse in the first four months in 2014. According to the Washington Post/ABC News opinion poll released on April 29, Obama's approval rating plunged to 41%, the lowest since the beginning of his presidency. The poll shows that only 42% supports his economic policy, and when it comes to the support for Obamacare, only 37% support the way the Obama administration handles its implementation. American public is also critical of Obama's handling of the Russian invasion of Crimea—only 34% in the poll supported the Administration's handling of the situation. His declining popularity and the low support for his handling of both domestic and foreign policy issues are worrisome for President Obama, as he goes into 2014 to face the Mid-Term election in November 2014.

<Washington - Foreign Policy>

While politically weak at home, Obama has been frustrated by a new crisis abroad since early March. The Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea is arguably a "game changer" in international politics.

Ukraine is not a first-tier strategic interest for Washington. Still, in this case, the United States must prove its willingness to stand up against a military aggression by Russia, although Ukraine is not a NATO member. This puts US into a strategic dilemma.

Until last year, the Obama administration's basic assumptions about the global strategic environments were: a) Europe is safe; b) wars in the Middle East are ending, and; c) US should therefore refocus on Asia. The situation in Ukraine suggests that such assumptions may no longer hold. Now, it is clear that a new Russian assertiveness has reared its head. Given Putin's defiance, it is probable that Russia under Putin double its efforts to undermine US strategic interests elsewhere, including the Middle East. Worse yet, the US has to seriously consider the possibility that China may take advantage of this opportunity in protecting its "core strategic interests," either on land or at sea. Simply put, the Ukraine crisis may have a profound impact on the Asia policy of the United States in the years to come, and may force the Obama administration to recalibrate its strategic priorities.

The Obama administration's efforts in easing tensions between Tokyo and Seoul—a functioning Japan-ROK relations is an indispensable element of US strategy in East Asia—reflects high-level US efforts to assure US interest and commitment to Asia. The United States arguably succeeded in convincing South Korean President Park to soften its position toward Prime Minister Abe. The Obama administration might have also persuaded Abe to publicly announce that the Kono statement on the "comfort women" will not be changed. Although initial results of such US intervention seems successful so far with the Japan-US-South Korea trilateral summit meeting in the Hague on March 25, no Japan-South Korea bilateral summit meeting was scheduled. As examined later, this may be partly because of the weakening of the South Korean presidency.

In March, prior to his Asia trip, US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel met with his counterparts from 10 ASEAN countries in Hawaii for the first US-ASEAN Defense Forum. While the discussion focused on the steps to enhance ASEAN's capacity to deal with large-scale disaster and other emergencies, it was meant to signal US vigilance to the developments in Southeast Asia, including South China Sea.

During Hagel's Asia trip, he had unambiguous messages to China. First, America will not allow China to interfere in open air, waters, space and cyberspace. Furthermore, Beijing shall not change the status quo by force, coercion or intimidation. In addition, Finally, China must not allow North Korea or Iran to develop nuclear weapons. Beijing should adopt more liberal and transparent policies and not challenge the existing maritime order in western Pacific

maintained by the US. Hagel also stated in China that "America's 'rebalancing' to the Asia-Pacific is about ensuring its presence and engagement" and re-affirms its "commitments to our treaty allies - Japan, Korea, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines." The remarks by Secretary Hagel were the right message to Beijing although the Chinese leaders may not want to acknowledge them. Still, some in Tokyo question whether the US forces really defend Japan when attacked in a crisis over the Senkakus. It is irrelevant to ask whether the US actually defends her ally in a specific crisis because alliance is not about possibility but it is about trust. Alliance is to believe that, when Japan is attacked but the US declines to respond, it is time for the alliance to end and for the United States to lose military bases in Japan and cease to be a Pacific power. The alliance interests are mutual and this is the essence of the balance of interests in the Japan-US alliance.

Speaking of US commitment to treaty allies, one of the most notable outcome from Obama's Asia trip was the signing of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the Philippines. This 10-year agreement would allow greater U.S. force access to Filipino military bases. Although there were no specifics on force rotations in the framework agreement, it will allow for the construction of new military facilities and utilization of existing facilities for more flexible access for the US forces. The deal is obviously motivated by Manila's increasing concern over disputed Scarborough Shoal and the Second Thomas Shoal. In eyes of Tokyo, a renewed US commitment to Manila boosted the solidarity vis-à-vis China on maritime security in East and South China Sea. US-Philippine EDCA also provided wider potential of the Japan-US coordination on capacity building towards Filipino coast guards and its armed forces.

<Republic of Korea – Signs of a troubled Presidency?>

For ROK, the first four months of 2014 were not particularly promising. On the one hand, its diplomacy, especially with the US and China, delivered good results for President Park. During the same period, on the other, tensions with North Korea deteriorated, while she encountered numerous domestic political difficulties that cannot be easily resolved.

As to the relationship with US, ROK and US made progress in some pending diplomatic issues; the ROK National Assembly passed the Special Measures Agreement (SMA) with the US. President Obama and President Park agreed on April 26 to postpone the OPCON transfer which had been scheduled next year.

As for China, President Park has tried to establish a strong tie with Beijing over the "history issues with Japan." In January 2014, President Park and President Xi celebrated the opening of the An Jung-geun memorial hall in Harbin, China. As to the North-South relations, despite

President Park's new vision of "peaceful unification," North Korean attitude toward Seoul has not improved.

The tragedy of the sinking of a ferry "*Sewol*" on April 16 is dramatically changing Seoul's domestic politics. On April 29, under increasing public pressure, President Park Geun-hye apologized for failing to prevent the ferry disaster whose victims were mostly young South Korean high school students. "My heart aches thinking how I can best apologize and ease the grief and pain for the failure to prevent this accident, and for the insufficient first response," President Park read in a prepared statement to her cabinet. Two days earlier, her prime minister took responsibility for the government handling of the incident and offered his resignation, saying that "There have been so many varieties of irregularities that have continued in every corner of our society and practices that have gone wrong."

Park is president of South Korea. As an elected politician, her responsibility is absolute. In this case, however, it is interesting that she felt pressured to apologize for the trouble caused by a private corporation (ferry company), which is something she, as a politician, could not possibly take responsibility for. Many inside and outside South Korea suggest that this is indicative of increasing political vulnerability for Park. If she continued to lose popular support, some in Tokyo fear, she would resort to anti-Japan campaign once again. Indeed, the only reason that the public has not completely lost confidence in the Park administration is the threat posed by North Korea.

<China and the Ukraine crisis>

Watching the recent geopolitical transformation in Europe from Tokyo, China seems to be trapped in a quandary. China neither supported nor vetoed a US-sponsored UN Security Council draft resolution denouncing the referendum in Crimea. China seems to ignore the fact that the latest Russian move was a clear violation of international law. Rather, they consider the crisis in Ukraine a potential beginning of the "second cold war." The Chinese leadership seems to fear that Beijing could be the next target and victim of the western "double standard" offensives against hostile non-western major powers.

This is the very reason why China sounds so ambivalent. If China voted for the US-led resolution criticizing Russia, Beijing would oppose the Russian annexation of Crimea as an act of aggression to change the status-quo by force. This will make China more vulnerable to criticism if and when Beijing tries to change the maritime status-quo by force in East and South China Sea.

If China vetoed the resolution, on the other hand, Beijing would publicly honor the right alleged by Russia to self-determination for the Russian speaking "minorities" in the region. This would not only invite criticism from international community that China accepts the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, but also automatically pave the way for China's domestic minorities in Uyghur, Tibet and elsewhere to legitimize their national cause in defying Beijing's harsh policies on minority groups. China's profound and never-ending dilemma may continue in a post "post-Cold War" era where the traditional, wild and irrational neo-nationalisms prevail.