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# **Epitaph to a Post-Cold War World: Russia Remakes the International Order and a Crisis for Japan**

Akihiro Iwashita

## **End of the “Interglacial Period”**

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has become a protracted conflict. TV shows are obsessed with the war, which has conveniently replaced the Covid-19 pandemic as a daily news topic. And anyone who hesitates to accept that “Ukraine is good; Russia is bad” risks censure from the general public.

In Japan, this manifests itself in odd ways. Russian language road signs in the northern city of Wakkanai in Hokkaido, just across the strait from Sakhalin island, have been a target of some media attacks, and the municipal authorities’ voicemail and inboxes are overflowing with demands for the immediate removal of Russian signage. The “Sakhalin Division,” a term the municipal office used for many years, was renamed the “International Exchange Division” immediately after the invasion.

A hot topic on the internet recently is a Russian “invasion of Hokkaido.” A news reporter took the possibility seriously and came to talk to me. I told him that I was reminded of the uproar when Soviet forces shot down Korean Air Lines Flight 007 off Sakhalin in 1983. Then, too, there were rumors of a “Soviet invasion of Hokkaido,” which came to nothing.

It is all reminiscent of the atmosphere of the Cold War period, with attempts being made to clarify the “friend-enemy” distinction. The world now appears to be entering a new kind of “Cold War.” It has changed from the previous Cold War because, firstly, Russia/Soviet Union, a founder of the post-World War II international order and the norms and rules under which it operated, is now violating them by aggressing against its neighbor. Second, the threat of nuclear annihilation has localized the war, and the reactions of countries inside and outside the region differ in intensity, making escalation into a global war unlikely. Third, the forceful revision of borders and space has created new fault lines in the world, and we may begin to see these cracks calcify and widen.

This new “ice age” (the world’s second Cold War) also begins in Europe. The period from 1991, when the Soviet Union was dismantled and the Cold War ended, to the present was the “post-Cold War period.” The prefix “post” implied that while the Cold War was certainly over, we did not yet know would come next. Now the “post-Cold War period” has come to an end. That 30 years of “peace and stability” resembled a warm period between two “ice ages,” so I call it the “interglacial period.”

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## **The First Cold War Period and its End**

World War I was a landmark in the emergence of the twentieth century's international order. The war was a total one, unleashing mighty military forces reflecting scientific and technological developments, controlling economies and mobilizing populations. Centered in Europe but extended to Asia, the war inflicted tremendous damage on civilians and shook the state system, including through the outbreak of revolutions. After the war, the League of Nations was established, and international norms promoted that prohibited war (except in cases of self-defense) and committed parties to the peaceful resolution of disputes.

Nevertheless, these measures did not prevent a second world war on a much larger scale. The Great War is the "first" world war, and the period between the two wars, 1919–1939, is the "interwar period." "20 years of crisis" (E. H. Carr) nevertheless saw an entente in Europe, and a "period of relative stability." This was then shattered by World War II.

Following that conflict, the United Nations was established on the basis of the non-use of force, with the prohibition of aggression confirmed in its Charter. The Genocide Convention became effective in 1951 and the "people's right to self-determination," stipulated in the UN Charter, led to "Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples" of 1960. Many colonies in Asia in the 1950s and in Africa in the 1960s achieved independence on the basis of "self-determination." "Westphalianization" created sovereign states all over the world. On the other hand, the world was also "divided" due to the confrontation between the two nuclear powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, the victors of World War II. This division began with the outbreak of the Cold War in postwar Europe.

That European crisis was of course linked to colonial liberation and independence movements in Asia, and to the involvement of the United States and the Soviet Union. In Northeast Asia, with the collapse of Japan's Imperial rule, a frigid international system emerged, divided between South Korea and North Korea, China and Taiwan, and so forth. In Southeast Asia, too, Indochina moved closer to the Soviet camp, while ASEAN emerged as an "anti-communist bastion." The same trends were also visible in the Middle East and Africa. While some countries tried to distance themselves from "bi-polarization" through "non-alignment," the intensification of conflict brought all parties closer to one camp or the other.

Since the 1960s, there was talk of a "transformation" of the Cold War system through "multi-polarity." Nuclear-armed France sometimes challenged U.S. hegemony, while China confronted the Soviet Union in their borderlands. In the 1970s, a détente was sought to entrench the status quo in Europe (in the Helsinki Accords). Outside Europe, by contrast, the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in repeated interventions, accompanied by military force.

After a brief period of heightened tension in the late 1970s and early 1980s, this global "bi-polarization" took a dramatic turn with Ronald Reagan, G.H. W. Bush, and Mikhail

Gorbachev. In particular, the Soviet Union's perestroika diplomacy led to the collapse of the communist-dominated system in Eastern Europe in 1989, which liberated those states from the bi-polar structure; the "wall" that had divided Europe broke down, and in 1991, the Soviet Union was dissolved. This was when the era known as "post-Cold War" began.

### **Entente of the Great Powers: *Uti Possidetis Juris* and the Renaissance of Regional Organizations**

People were initially jubilant. The world seemed to have become "one," and phrases such as "the end of history" and "a world without borders" proliferated. International legal norms were applied in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of newly independent countries. In accordance with the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, which had been applied during the decolonization of Latin America, Africa, and parts of the Middle East, existing administrative boundaries, here those of the constituent republics of the Soviet Union, were to be recognized as national borders. The application of these principles was aimed at the peaceful transition of the international order, as far as possible. The rule against forcefully modifying borders was also reaffirmed.

Of course, there were failures, such as the Yugoslav civil war, but in many former communist spaces, the transition proceeded peacefully. However, this meant the non-recognition of autonomous republics or provinces, sub-regional actors that asserted their sovereignty under the new system. During the transition period, the international community generally excluded the "unrecognized states" (e.g., South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Primorskiye Dniester, etc.) from the political map, although these polities had, effectively, established their own areas of rule within the former Soviet space.

During the first stage of the "interglacial period" (from 1991 to around 2002), the opening of borders and liberalization of internal migration in the former communist countries had an enormous impact. The rapid introduction of the market economy dramatically increased interdependence across the world. Although not as dramatic as in Europe, even in regions with firm borders, such as Northeast Asia, there were increases in the flows of people between nations, and in the levels of interdependence between them. The establishment of diplomatic relations between South Korea, the Soviet Union, and China and the admission of North Korea and South Korea to the UN increased regional integration; people moved more frequently between Taiwan and China, and there was increased dialogue even amongst Japan, South Korea, and North Korea. In Southeast Asia, the Indochina countries joined ASEAN and established a forum encompassing the rest of the region. In Central Asia, a Sino-Russian initiative established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, seeking to build confidence and stability in the borderlands. The ambiguity of the "strategic partnership" between the two countries, "not enmity" and "not an alliance" (towards a third party), reflected the mood of the times.

Regional cooperation also became more active in the West. This was the case with the enlargement and deepening of the EU and the establishment of NAFTA. The 1990s thus saw a renaissance of regional organizations, but their openness, and the overlap of multiple institutions, prevented the emergence of a clear “friend-enemy” distinction. Even “NATO’s eastern expansion”, which Vladimir Putin today uses as a pretext for invading Ukraine, did not necessarily exclude Russia at the time. Russia became a member of the G8 in 1998, and this U.S.-Russia “honeymoon” was much praised at the time of 9/11 in 2001.

Of course, even though the trend was towards entente amongst the great powers, regional conflicts were not extinguished. A number of disputes also arose or manifested as a result of the disappearance of the “bi-polarity” characteristic of the Cold War. The Somali civil war, the Yugoslav civil war, the Kashmir conflict, Indian-Pakistani nuclear weapon development, the identification of “rogue states” such as Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, and the escalation of Israeli oppression of Palestine, all become normalized to varying degrees, and the challenges posed to states by non-state or sub-regional actors also became more pronounced. In turn, many states attempted to cooperate in responding to these conflicts, with multilateral attempts to combat “terrorism” and “separatism” constituting the clearest expression of this.

#### **From Rivalry to Confrontation: 2008 and 2014**

The second stage of the “interglacial period” was characterized by growing cracks in the relationship between the Russia and the United States. The occasion was George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq. Putin, who now calls the United States a “lying superpower,” always mentions this at the first opportunity. Based on the “lie” that there were “weapons of mass destruction,” a multinational force invaded Iraq, captured Saddam Hussein, and detained him in a U.S. facility (he was executed after a trial in a special Iraqi court). Putin sees this as a violation of international law (and hence argues that Russia, as another great power, has the right to behave in a similar manner).

The Color Revolutions, Rose in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine’s Orange of 2004 and Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip of 2005, rocked former Soviet Space: Russia would claim that these popular mobilizations against corrupt governments were fomented by U.S. and Western hands. After them, Georgia and Ukraine became more reliant on the West. President Bush opened a “future” path to NATO for both countries, though the West recognized Russian uneasiness over NATO’s expansion among its former Soviet neighbors.

Two situations that arose in 2008 called into question the very rules that defined the “post-Cold War.” The West’s recognition of Kosovo’s independence in February marked the beginning of a shakeup of the order that *uti possidetis juris* had created. The fact that an autonomous region became an independent sovereign state that the majority of the world immediately recognized set a precedent, however peaceful and democratic it may have been. In

August of the same year, in the Russo-Georgian War, Russia in turn recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as sovereign states. However, as it could be argued that Georgia initiated the war, the West did not necessarily see it as a change of the current order precipitated by Russian force.

The year 2014 can be understood as the opening of the third stage in the sense that it ended the period of entente amongst the great powers, and created deeper fissures between the West and Russia (with Russia becoming clearly positioned as “revisionist”). The Maidan Revolution in Ukraine and the country’s turn to the West provoked a furious response from Russia, which seized Crimea and effectively invaded eastern Ukraine, shocking the world. With Russia’s expulsion from the G8 and the West and Japan’s imposition of economic sanctions, Putin’s willingness to change the order became clear. Even so, Putin still justified his actions by claiming that the annexation of Crimea was based on the principle of the “people’s right to self-determination” or the “will” of Crimea’s population, 60% of whom were of Russian-descent. The intervention in eastern Ukraine was also justified as a form of “civil war,” and the subsequent ceasefire and Minsk Protocol recognized Ukraine as a sovereign state and called for autonomy for Luhansk and Donetsk. In short, while trying to forcefully break the status quo as the “revisionist,” Russia had yet to “violate” international rules themselves.

Although relations with the West stalled after 2014, Russia grew closer to China, leading to what could be called a quasi-alliance. Xi Jinping, who took over as leader in 2012, has tightened his grip on the country, as if in step with Putin, and is unabashedly strengthening China’s presence in neighboring spaces. The two countries had established a “relationship of trust” by resolving border issues during the “interglacial period,” and that relationship has since deepened daily, not only through military and economic cooperation, but also because of growing similarities between their regimes, such as tighter information control and the establishment of a repressive rule against dissidents and minorities. Their common interest in countering U.S. efforts to shore up the existing international order has strengthened the bond between them.

The deepening of Sino-Russian relations may have impacted on the Central Eurasian order as well. For example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization admitted the extra-regional observer countries of India and Pakistan as official members in 2015. Although tensions between China and India over land and sea borders persist, the two countries’ economic interdependence deepened during the “interglacial period,” and there is a growing view in India that China is not necessarily the main enemy. The triangular Sino-Indian-Russian “strategic partnership” proposed by then Russian Premier Evgeny Primakov in 1998 has also taken root, with Russia acting as a “bridge” between China and India. Moreover, the three countries work together in BRICS and other areas, while cooperation between Russia and Pakistan over “anti-terrorism” and other issues has led to cooperative relations among the four countries in the context of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Heads of state, prime ministers, foreign ministers, defense ministers, and others meet annually at their respective levels, holding bilateral consultations.

Relations between the U.S.-led group and the rest of the world are becoming increasingly complex, with a multilayered order is being formed.

### **Japan as a Key Battlefield in the Second Cold War**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine ended the "post-Cold War" by openly challenging international borders and the international order by force. A group of "unrecognized states" that the international community was unwilling to acknowledge now seeks recognition, and Russia is using this as leverage to redraw the map of Europe. However, the coming "ice age" will not be a "bi-polar" one; rather, various vectors of conflict based on "multi-polarity" will emerge in different regions, in the context of global relationships. When a non-state actor, such as ISIL, complicates these conflicts, and threatens the fundamental interests of both the United States and Russia, this would lessen confrontation between the great powers.

If so, Japanese position during the second Cold War period must also be multilayered. First, we firmly oppose Russia's challenge to the international community. Japan must clearly support Ukraine as a state and be in the camp of law and order.

Second, this is the beginning of a new era in Europe, but the phenomenon has not yet spilled over into Asia. Learning from the first Cold War, we must prevent the fissures opening up in Asia from solidifying and deepening in tandem with the Cold War. For example, if China and Russia unite in a military alliance, Japan will face an unprecedented threat in confronting them in tandem with North Korea, which has already welcomed Russia's stance toward the United States with missiles.

New confrontations in the maritime domain will also submerge Japan. The previous Cold War was mainly land-based conflicts—the Chinese Revolution, the Korean War, and the Sino-Soviet Split—and left Japan, surrounded by the sea, as an island of sorts, but this is unlikely to continue. Japan has maritime disputes (including territorial disputes) with all its neighbors, and could be a "key battleground" of the second Cold War. Furthermore, Japan-Korea relations are still in a state that is difficult to repair. The challenge for South Korea, which regained "diplomatic freedom" during the interglacial period and "rediscovered" historical issues with Japan that date back to before World War II, has the potential to make the U.S.-Japan-South Korea partnership dysfunctional.

In retrospect, at the beginning of the last Cold War, the U.S.-Japan alliance was not a given, and was one that deepened as the axis of confrontation, U.S.-Japan-ROK vs. Soviet Union-China-DPRK, became entrenched. After the end of the Cold War and into the interglacial period, the alliance strengthened, not loosened. This was the decision of Japan's political elite, which sought to bolster its security by embracing the United States on the premise that it could not acquire nuclear weapons. In the new Cold War, the U.S.-Japan alliance meant that Japan has only one partner on which to rely: the United States. However, despite the U.S.-Japan Security

Treaty, U.S. interests are not the same as those of Japan. The United States is distant from the region and will not necessarily confront China and Russia in it. There is no guarantee that the United States will not return to a cooperative relationship with China, in which case, Japan would be isolated.

### **Reshaping Japan's Foreign Policy through its "Neighborhood"**

The time has come for Japan to develop a "neighborhood diplomacy" that prioritizes its own interests. Up until now, Japan has relied too heavily on diplomacy based on relations with the United States (as well as the Quad, which has recently become fashionable). It is now necessary to establish relationships based on shared interests with China, Russia, and South Korea as "neighbors." A local perspective that is not reduced to the national is also needed here.

How should we deal with Russia today? Russia has taken a tough stance toward Japan as an "unfriendly" country with regard to territorial issues and sovereignty, and discontinued "non-passport/visa" exchanges for Japanese, which began during the interglacial period. For the time being, any sort of "homecoming" for former Northern Territories islanders, whose average age is 87, is impossible.

Let us build an argument based on interests and livelihood. First, with regard to energy, Japan should maintain, not suspend, its interests in Sakhalin II. Second, it is important to maintain the benefits of local waters. For example, the fishing industry is considered one "thread" that ties Japan and Russia together (Takeshi Hamada, *Hokkaido Shimbun*, April 28, 2022). Of course, fishery negotiations, including at the national level where they are tied to sanctions, are tough. However, these negotiations still proceed in a businesslike manner, and the effects of the war are virtually nonexistent.

In April 2022, negotiations were concluded with Russia regarding salmon/trout fishing in Japan's 200 nautical mile zone. Additionally, kelp fishing from Nemuro to the Kaigara Island, a few kilometers distant but a part of the Russian-controlled Habomai Islets, was realized under the Russian authorities in late June as usual (though slightly delayed). Perhaps a 200 nautical mile reciprocal fishing agreement for horse mackerel and mackerel, a package that includes operations on the Japanese side, which the Russians strongly desire, will also be concluded in the future.

By reflecting on the experiences of the last Cold War and the interglacial period, we can devise survival strategies for the coming "Cold War." We are not at war with Russia. According to former Habomai residents of the Northern Territories, which were overrun by Soviet forces at the end of World War II, "Russian leaders are not the same as the ordinary Russian citizens, who are good and trustworthy." This view has developed out of their experiences of interacting with Russian islanders through annual travel, via the "non-passport/visa" exchanges during the interglacial period. Hence, the appropriate stance is not "black and white." What we need the

most is the wisdom to navigate through the various fissures and overcome the crisis.

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