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Editorial article

## East Asia at the Crossroads of Cooperation and Rivalry at the Regional and International Levels: Editorial Introduction

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**Abstract.** The rise of new powers throughout the 2000s and the 2010s augurs the end of the unipolar system that has persisted since the end of the Cold War. In no region is this transition more compelling than in East Asia. Economic revitalization of this region and a steady redistribution of power related to it is a dynamic process characterized by intense changes in foreign policy strategies, practices, and orientations of China, Korea, and Japan. The proposed special issue seeks to critically assess the emerging developments of China's, Japan's, and Korea's core international perceptions and policies. More specifically, the special issue addresses two complex and interrelated questions. Firstly, how do China, Korea, and Japan adapt to the changing international landscape? Secondly, how do China, Korea, and Japan respond to the challenges inherent to the pursuit of enhanced international status? The contributions to this special issue aim at scrutinizing China's cyber sovereignty and industrial policy, exploring the strengths and limitations of South Korea's public diplomacy, and examining Japan's contributions to regionalism. The special issue also discusses Russia's relations with East Asia and its role in regional politics.

**Keywords:** East Asia, Globalization, Regional development, Korea, China, international politics

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The structure of international relations and the world economy during the Cold War was based on the logic of bipolarity, characterized by the strategic rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. In this framework, East Asia was considered a peripheral zone of the greater Asian subsystem, where the northern axis (the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea) opposed the southern axis (the United States, Japan, and South Korea). Strategic interactions between the superpowers determined the geopolitical fate of East

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Asia, while the states of the region themselves were seen as secondary participants whose behavior was determined by the balance of power between the superpowers. Following this logic, regional dynamics were considered a mere extension of the interactions between the US and the USSR at a systemic level. In the 1980s, the geopolitical situation began to change dramatically, and by the 1990s, East Asia had already become one of the main engines of the global economy. China, Korea, and Japan maintained steady growth even at the peak of the 2008–2009 global financial crisis and became a catalyst for changes in the system of international relations in the 2010s.

Therefore, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the center of world economic and political life shifted from the West to the East, making the Asian region more interesting for comprehensive study and comparative analysis. Russia's political turn to the East, which has already been officially confirmed, also underlines the timeliness and relevance of scientific research on the economic and political transformations in the leading countries of the region – China, Japan, and South Korea.

The interest in East Asia among Russian researchers is mostly due to the geographical proximity, the history of relations, as well as the growing global influence of the countries of the region as a whole. Establishing stable ties with its Asian neighbors provides Russia with more opportunities for realizing its own goals on the world stage. The growing development of Russia's economic and political ties with the countries of the Asian region opens up new prospects for cooperation not only in the field of economy and politics but also in the field of culture, education, and healthcare. The latter is particularly relevant in the light of the global struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, Russia's cooperation with the East Asian states can be effective only if all joint projects are developed and implemented taking into account the internal development conditions of East Asia. Russia needs a good understanding of both Asian popular culture and social development, as well as domestic and diplomatic priorities. This is what determines the absolute relevance of East Asian studies today.

Today, China is the largest economy in Asia, while Japan and South Korea are in second and fourth place respectively. Together, they provide a quarter of the world's economic output. China, South Korea, and Japan remain competitive by developing advanced technology as well as intensively investing in innovative fields of the economy and human resources. Not only does East Asia create economic trends but it also becomes a source of new globalization models [Liu, Dunford, and Gao 2018]

and even of new trends in culture development [Joo 2011]. Meanwhile, the leading Asian economy – China – is not limited to regional frameworks and is taking an increasingly strong position in the international arena, participating in large-scale unions, such as BRICS, and creating new integration models, such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

At the same time, East Asia also has a peculiar security dynamics. First of all, the North Korean nuclear crisis poses the most serious threat to collective security. Secondly, even though China, South Korea, and Japan have become much closer to each other via intensive socio-cultural exchanges, the rise of nationalism fueled by traumatic memories of wars and ideological conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, exacerbates mutual distrust<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the “hidden antagonism” [Kristof 1998, 38], as well as the “historical estrangement” [Ikenberry and Mastanduno 2003, 2] and “security dilemmas” [Klare 1993, 152], which have long been warned about by observers, have gradually eroded the foundations of the multipolar structure of the regional order over the past two decades.

The continuing decline of the US influence over the Asia-Pacific region [Khong 2018], the remilitarization of Japan [Koga 2017], the hegemonic ambitions of China [Sørensen 2015, Gill 2020], and the increasing military tension on the Korean Peninsula [Khudoley 2018] contribute to the escalation of long-standing conflicts. Could this dynamic imply that pessimistic scenarios are starting to come true?

The proposed special issue answers this question by offering a critical (re-)assessment of the main trends in the fields of economy, foreign policy, and domestic development of China, Korea, and Japan. The issue is based on papers presented at the international interdisciplinary conference *Korea and Russia: International Agenda* in October 2020, organized by the HSE University (Russia) and Kyonggi University (Republic of Korea). The conference marked the anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Korea and brought together more than 50 outstanding scholars from more than ten different countries, ranging from Mexico to Japan. The main objective of both the conference and the issue is to understand how the overlapping dimensions of regional and international relations merge into the complex

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<sup>1</sup> The Economist. An old grudge between Japan and South Korea is getting out of hand. 23 August 2019. URL: <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/08/29/an-old-grudge-between-japan-and-south-korea-is-getting-out-of-hand>. (accessed: 23.01.2021). The Economist. A spat over a statue puts South Korea and Japan at odds. 14 January 2017. <https://www.economist.com/asia/2017/01/12/a-spat-over-a-statue-puts-south-korea-and-japan-at-odds> (accessed: 23.01.2021).

political and socio-economic development of modern East Asia and to explain how China, Korea, and Japan are adapting to the changing international environment.

Without a doubt, the most impressive part in the history of East Asia's development over the past two decades has been the dynamic economic growth associated with multiplying bilateral, regional, and global interdependencies. Konstantin Korneev examines the geopolitical and economic factors of Japan's inclusion in integration processes, as well as the specifics of Japan's participation in regional and sub-regional trade agreements. His research shows that Japan is consistently engaging in the Asia-Pacific regionalism and is not going to lock itself up in a narrow national framework, despite the turbulence in relations with its closest neighbors and main trading partners, China and South Korea.

The increasing economic interdependence of the national economy has become a major development imperative and a major stabilizing factor in East Asia; however, not all of the states can build an effective model of cooperation. For instance, Cho Yongsung's research shows that although North and South Korea are equally interested in expanding economic ties and establishing transportation routes with the Eurasian continent, their joint infrastructure projects are stalled due to international sanctions restricting cooperation with North Korea. Thus, the fate of inter-Korean infrastructure projects is determined not only by the economic rationality and interests of Seoul and Pyongyang but also by the imperatives of the Seoul-Washington alliance.

The rise of East Asia inevitably draws attention to China. In 2017, China accounted for 12.4% of world trade<sup>2</sup>. China's GDP is more than 23 trillion US dollars, and it certainly has enough economic weight to assert its presence and demonstrate its strengths at both regional and global levels. Klavdia Chernilevskaya shows that China's leadership initiates a transition to a more active strategy of yuan internationalization. This study of China's new monetary policy complements Raisa Epikhina's analysis of industrial policies. This paper tells us about the peculiarities of industrial modernization and changes in the industrial structure under the active participation of the state, on the example of the electric power sector.

China's economic growth questions the ability of the US to influence the global financial and trade order, forcing the US to turn to a protective mode

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<sup>2</sup> ChinaPower Project. Is China the World's Top Trader? March 28, 2019. Updated August 25, 2020. ChinaPower.CSIS.Org. URL: <https://chinapower.csis.org/trade-partner/> (accessed: 23.01.2021).

and try to constrain China's growth. Since the tensions in Sino-American relations are unlikely to decrease in the near future [Lukin 2019], China challenges American hegemony not only in the realm of the global economy but also in other areas. International cyberspace has become one of the newest battlegrounds. The United States was at the forefront of the "cyber revolution" from day one, while China joined it relatively late. Nevertheless, today China is making rapid progress. Its leaders actively promote the concept of "cyberspace with Chinese specifics." This complex and multi-layered process is analyzed in the article of Ekaterina Mikhalevich.

Amid the escalating economic conflict with the United States, China faces a huge (if even resolvable) task: it needs to legitimize its geopolitical claims and prove, first of all to its closest neighbors, that it has become a full-fledged participant in international relations and is ready to play by the rules established. China's success in promoting its national brand leaves much to be desired [Servaes 2016], while South Korea, on the contrary, has established itself as a leader in this field. Eriks Varpahovskis analyzes South Korean knowledge diplomacy, one of the newest tools of "soft power". Agapi Matosian's article is devoted to the role of the "Korean wave" in the formation of the South Korean national brand. Both studies show that the key to the effectiveness of South Korea's "soft power" strategy lies in constant innovation and quick responses to changes in the international agenda. The works of Varpahovskis and Matosian are complemented by Anna Sorokina, Anastasiia Katrich, and Anna Shilina's research devoted to the image of Russia in modern South Korean youth and the image of Korea among Russian youth.

"Soft power" helps Seoul ascend beyond its capabilities on the world stage and persuade the international community to support its conciliatory politics towards North Korea. In the long term, the effectiveness of "soft power" in this aspect of foreign politics will depend, among other things, on how consistently Seoul will embody its values at home. In this aspect, historical memory policies play an important role.

The problems of historical revisions are raised in the work of Natalia Kim. Notably, the author examines in detail how the initiative of restoring national and family history becomes an essential component of the national unification process. While South Korea builds national identity and creates cultural narratives through a dynamic dialogue between the state and society, in North Korea, the state maintains a monopoly on the interpretation of both the collective present and the collective past. Exploring propaganda posters as one of the genres of state propaganda, Vorobeva Anastasia and Ragozina

Sabina show that the totalitarian regime recreates national history through dichotomous images of “friends” and “foes”.

In general, this special issue complements and expands the image of the current state of leading East Asian countries and, based on the results, allows us to draw important conclusions about the opportunities for Russia in terms of implementing further strategies of building the most efficient relations with China, Japan, and Korea. The turn to the East, announced by the Valdai Club in the early 2010s, is just starting to gain momentum: without undermining the importance of all the steps implemented by now to strengthen Russia’s presence in Asia and ensure the development of Siberia and the Far East, it is important to note the necessity for further promoting trade, economic and political ties with the countries of East Asia, forming a new space for joint development in Eurasia [Karaganov and Bordachev 2019].

As a future starting point for researchers in Asian studies, it is worth considering the degree of importance of third countries for economic and political expansion. Thus, China and other Asian investors are actively increasing their presence around the leading countries of Latin-Caribbean America and Africa, displacing traditional players (primarily the United States and the European Union) from these markets. In the nearest future, the struggle for access to these markets will only escalate, posing new scientific challenges for modern researchers in regional studies, political science, and economics, that are already requiring to be considered.

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