



The Expansionism of China and Russia: The Second Coming of Imperialism?

## The Legitimacy of an International Order is Put to the Test Illusion of imperialism: Some countries chase it, while others fear it

Nakanishi Hiroshi, Professor, Graduate School of Law, Kyoto University

### From the Age of Negotiations to the Age of Power Politics



NAKANISHI Hiroshi, Professor,  
Graduate School of Law, Kyoto  
University

President Vladimir Putin of Russia visited Shanghai on May 20 and 21, 2014. During his visit, Putin had a summit meeting with President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China. The news media distributed photographs of the two leaders firmly shaking hands all around the world. At the summit, the two heads of state declared a full-scale partnership and new-level strategic cooperative ties between Russia and China. After their talk, Putin and Xi issued a joint statement covering points such as their united opposition to attempts to falsify history and disturb the postwar world order, and the Russo-Chinese co-sponsorship of an event in 2015 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the victory over German fascism and Japanese militarism, in place of opposition to interference in the internal affairs of another country and one-sided sanctions. Following the summit meeting, Russia and China signed an agreement on the sale of Russian natural gas to China, which they had been negotiating for ten

years, and carried out their third joint military drills. With these actions, Russia and China produced the impression that their cooperative connections had deepened.

This honeymoon between Russia and China looks like an alliance between nations that are defying the current state of an international order and wish to put an end to the current situation without ruling out the use of force. Indeed, Russia and China have begun to pursue their national interests with the use of force without fearing the souring of relations with Western countries and neighboring states. This tendency is undeniable. Russia decided to incorporate Crimea, which had chosen to become independent from Ukraine based on a lopsided local referendum, into the Russian Federation in March 2014. This Russian decision invited strong criticism and sanctions from the West. In the meantime, China declared the establishment of its air defense



identification zone (ADIZ) unilaterally and asked aircraft to provide notification before flying through the zone in November 2013. Recently, Chinese fighters twice caused near misses with scout planes from Japan's Self-Defense Forces in an area that overlaps the Japanese ADIZ. In May 2014, China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) set up a huge oil rig and began wildcat drilling for oil in the waters around the Paracel Islands, a territory in dispute with Vietnam. China has reportedly sent its naval forces to the waters where fishing boats and public vessels from Vietnam and China have entered into repeated skirmishes.

Russia and China are two immense powers in Eurasia. They are also permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. The attitude described above, which Russia and China have begun to take, has significant implication for international politics because it appears to cross the line the two countries used to abide by. In the past, Russia and China have opposed the administration of international politics led by the West again and again, and have exercised their veto at various times since the end of the Cold War. For example, the two countries opposed the exercise of military power at the United Nations Security Council when conflict broke out in Kosovo in 1999. They have also taken a shared stance to oppose sanctions against North Korea and interventions in the civil war in Syria at the Security Council. Those actions have been diplomatic opposition within an international order.

In contrast, Russia and China have recently used force to take unilateral actions. They represent greater defiance to the legitimacy of an international order. International politics have left the stage of negotiations within an order and moved closer to the stage of a power struggle that involves the use of force or threat.

If that is the case, should we in the west take the view that Russia and China have already become expansionist or imperialist states? At this point, we must accurately analyze the sources of the actions taken by these two countries, their intentions and their capacities, instead of placing such strong political labels on them.

To be sure, Russia has infringed on the sovereignty of Ukraine and absorbed a section of the country into its own territory. This was an act that contravened the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, which Ukraine had signed with countries such as Russia and the United States in return for handing over nuclear weapons that it had inherited from the defunct Soviet Union to Russia. We can call this act a unilateral attempt to change the status quo that clearly violated the law of nations.

However, an international order is different from an order within a country. In many cases, it is impractical to understand an international order from the perspective of legitimacy alone. Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea, whose control was transferred to Ukraine during the Soviet era and where residents of Russian descent comprise the majority, has weak areas politically. In that sense, the status quo contains ambiguity as far as Crimea is concerned. In my opinion, the assessment that the Russian act constituted a decisive change in the current situation is a judgment biased toward legalism.

Speaking of China, the country has taken actions in the South China Sea and East China Sea based on its territorial claims. However, the opportunistic use of theories that are favorable to China's position stands out in those claims, compared with the generally accepted interpretations of the law of nations. For example, China claims historical rights over the Senkaku Islands, but makes no mention of the fact that it did not claim them



until 1971. In the meantime, China is denying the Vietnamese claim over the Paracel Islands on the grounds that Vietnam made no territorial claim over the Islands until 1974.

I must say that China's stance on the law of nations reflects its weak respect to the notion of the rule of law, which means laws are respected as norms that transcend rulers, and its attachment toward legalism, which considers laws as mere tools for control. It must also be admitted, however, that the legal order concerning territorial rule in China's coastal waters is not so clearly defined. China is taking overbearing actions within the limits of this ambiguity. Therefore it is not conclusive that China holds a clear resolve to change or destroy the existing situation.

### **Eurasian Union and strong sea power**

The fundamental question is, even if the actions taken by Russia and China are not clearly imperialist at this stage, they may be stepping stones towards more expansionist policies. Adolf Hitler hollowed out the existing international order of the 1930s step by step, occupying the Rhineland and breaking up Czechoslovakia, while avoiding frontal defiance to the order. Russia and China may be attempting to turn the current international order into a mere shell in the same way. For example, U.S. historian Walter Russell Mead called the three countries Russia, China and Iran an "axis of weevils." Weevil is obviously a pun on the word evil from "axis of evil," an expression used by former U.S. President George W. Bush. An axis of weevils seems to contain the meaning that these three countries are forces that are undermining the current order from within.

Certainly, declarations and documents issued by Russia and China have included content suggesting that they are defying the present state of an international order. Putin proposed the concept of the Eurasian Union a short while before his return to the position of president of Russia. The three nations of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan signed a treaty establishing the Eurasian Union toward the formation of an economic bloc in May 2014. In military areas, Russia is attaching importance to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which consists of several of the former Soviet Bloc nations (Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). Organizations such as this are said to have been modeled after the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, they could also be considered to be Russia's attempts to rebuild its past sphere of influence. It is possible, if not probable, that the Russian policies regarding Ukraine and other regions in Eastern Europe are based on the country's plan to place these regions under its control in the future.

China has advocated its transformation into a strong sea power since the period when Hu Jintao was in power. Since Xi Jinping came to power, the country has added overblown rhetoric to this policy, such as the "Chinese dream" and "the great revival of the Chinese people." President Xi reportedly said that the Pacific has enough space to accommodate the two great powers of the United States and China when he proposed new world power relations to U.S. President Barack Obama at their summit in June 2013. With this statement, Xi may have been announcing China's plan to divide and rule the Pacific with the United States.



Some analysts have claimed that under this plan China is seeking to establish advantages over the United States within the second island chain that extends from the Ogasawara Islands to Guam, and build an original network of bases (known as the pearl necklace) in a sea lane stretching from the Indian Ocean to the Middle East after establishing its superiority within the first island chain that includes the Nansei Islands, the Bashi Channel between Taiwan and the Philippines, and the entire South China Sea. There is a possibility that China is positioning its current actions in the East China Sea and South China Sea as a step in this grand plan, rather than simply as efforts to deal with territorial disputes.

### Empire or Prestige?

Be that as it may, it remains just a possibility at this point that Russia and China are taking these actions based on this grand plan for achieving a breakthrough. As people who are definitely aware of the outcomes of history, we think that other countries should have confronted the Nazis at an earlier stage based on our understanding that an appeasement policy for the Nazis failed. However, there is no guarantee that confrontation with the Nazis at an earlier stage would have led to the maintenance of peace, or that it would have resulted in a smaller war at the very least. Even if the appeasement failed, its opposite deterrence may or may not have worked.

Hans Morgenthau, an eminent scholar of international politics, classified power politics into three types: status quo maintenance policies, imperialism, and prestige policies. What these classifications tell us is the difficulty to tell imperialism and prestige policies apart. Imperialism refers to policies for changing the current situation with military force. Prestige policies are policies that are implemented to display power. Prestige policies create the impression that their exerciser is powerful, and urge other nations to submit to its rule. These policies could be a means of imperialism in some cases, and they may be a way of strengthening the legitimacy of a domestic administration in others. The possibility remains that the grand plans of Russia and China are merely prestige policies for chasing the illusion of imperialism. Given the paucity of the content in their “grand plans,” this may well be the case.

In the first place, the power base in Russia and China is far weaker at present, compared with the base the Nazis had. There is no powerful ideology that corresponds to Nazism in these two countries. Both countries lack a political ideology with a strong appeal beyond the level of relatively simple nationalism. In the second place, domestic grievances have accumulated considerably in the two countries. Both the Putin administration and Xi’s government are suppressing the mass media more and increasing their reliance on military and security organizations as their power base, which suggests their weakness, rather than strength. For this reason, there is little prospect for criticisms against the government to come to the surface in a big way in Russia and China for the time being. However, there is also the impression that cynicism against public propaganda has spread considerably in the two countries.

Furthermore, a reasonable prospect is that their “grand strategic plans” will run short of their national strength in the long run. The population of Russia is anticipated to decrease at a faster pace than the population



of Japan, from 140 million to around 100 million in 2015. In addition, Russia has failed to reform its economy following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The country has not been able to develop a noteworthy industry other than the military and energy, either.

By contrast, China is admittedly a rising global power. We should take the view that the uptrend for the country will basically continue into the future. However, various social contradictions that were produced by the country's rapid economic growth under one-party rule have obviously accumulated in its society. Domestic tension is rising as a result. In addition, China is aging rapidly. The sustainability of its economic growth based on its large working population is open to doubt. China's per capita GDP is slightly under 10,000 U.S. dollars, even though the country has become the world's second-largest economic power. The per capita GDP is only about one third of the figure for advanced nations. It is true that this low income standard could mean that China still has the potential for further economic growth. However, China requires substantial reforms of its domestic politics and economy to achieve such economic growth, and Xi Jinping must be well aware of it.

Xi has concentrated his power more quickly and broadly than his predecessors, including Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. This fact probably reflects the awareness of such reforms of the leadership of the Communist Party of China. However, Putin's meeting with 87-year-old Jiang Zemin during his last visit to Shanghai and its huge media coverage may indicate a power struggle in the upper reaches of the Chinese leadership. The Shanghai faction headed by Jiang controls resource groups. This faction may have an influence over the gas agreement with Russia and resource development in the waters near the Paracel Islands.

Furthermore, the close strategic partnership now being displayed by Russia and China could grow tense should each nation pursue imperialist policies. At the summit in Shanghai, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (a framework low in visibility proposed by Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev; hereinafter the CICA) was taken up in a big way, instead of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to which Russia had attached importance.

In a keynote address for the meeting, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that his country would discard its old-fashioned view of security and seek security based on openness, equality and transparency, and that countries in Asia have the ability to achieve regional security through mutual cooperation. To Russia, these statements must have sounded like warning messages. As a matter of fact, Xi spelled out a Silk Road economic belt plan and called for the strengthening of relationships between central Asia and China when he visited central Asian countries in September 2013. Friction with the Russian concept of the Eurasian Union referred to above may rise if China concretizes this plan.

### **Take Kennan's advice, this time precisely**

Countries that wish to defend an international order should not fear the imperialism of Russia and China at this stage but aim to prevent the illusion of imperialism from substantializing. They should make the two countries realize that what they are chasing is nothing but a ghost of the past age.



Attempts to build a security system aimed at limiting the unilateral use of force are an essential first step towards this goal. This is the case because the legitimacy of an international order itself is lost when the use of force becomes a *fait accompli* as a result of repeated practice. The need for international cooperation to maintain an international order increases naturally under the present circumstances, in which the United States is taking a passive stance on external involvement. Viewed in this context, Japan's more positive involvement in international security is obviously important. Japan's exercise of the right of collective self-defense and participation in collective security arrangements under the United Nations initiative are important from this perspective.

At the same time, the countries of the Western bloc that have taken the initiative in an international order in the period since the end of the Cold War must ponder on their past record. The Western bloc nations have administered an international order with their excessively optimistic view that a desirable order would naturally emerge just by overthrowing nondemocratic regimes, based on the fortunate experience that the decommunization of countries that formerly belonged to the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc was achieved peacefully on the whole.

As a result of their lighthearted interventionism, a huge area of instability was born in the margins of the Eurasian Continent, from North Africa to Northeast Asia. The emergence of this unstable area is the root cause which tolerates Russian and Chinese actions for changing the existing conditions. The countries of the Western bloc prepared the ground by setting the precedent of changing the international order with force by supporting destruction of the regimes even if those regimes were nondemocratic. Russian President Putin cited the acceptance of Kosovo's independence from Serbia by the Western bloc nations as a precedent when his country absorbed Crimea into its territory. Making a distinction between these two cases is not easy if the liberal democratic aspect are not taken into account. The bigger problem was not overthrowing the nondemocratic regimes, but the West not having any follow up plans to sustain and stabilize the post-conflict countries.

The countries in the West must have the force and willingness to oppose imperialist policies or attempts to change the status quo with force. However, they should not limit such force to military power. The important thing is the capacity to develop an overall order, in other words, the capacity to provide governance, in order to avoid the illusory imperialist power finding incentives for their ambitions. Such capacity will be a key factor that attracts the people of Russia and China against their leaders, calms their nationalistic excitement and fuels their opposition to the policy of changing the status quo taken by their governments.

George F. Kennan, remembered as an advocate of "containment" policies during the Cold War era, was actually strongly critical of the Cold War policies implemented by the United States. Kennan advocated long-term, patient, firm and careful containment in response to Soviet expansionist tendencies. However, such containment had nothing to do with making performance-like threats, outcries and the display of external stubbornness with exaggerated gestures. Kennan advocated containment that prompts other countries to change themselves by continuing to present the values of the United States to them while avoiding actions that would drive them into a corner where they are unable to make any concessions.





Later in his life, Kennan criticized NATO's eastward expansion in the second half of the 1990s bitterly as an expression of extreme insensibility to the Russian psychology. He went on to condemn it as a "fatal mistake." As a matter of course, there is no need to deal with the current imperialist actions of Russia and China with a sense of atonement, even though Western policy mistakes were one of their sources. The countries of the Western bloc should not do such a thing. However, they should not repeat the Cold War mistakes, either. What they should do at the present time is practice what Kennan truly intended in his containment policies, in other words, make diplomacy work while deterring strong-arm actions by other countries and urge the other countries to change themselves, rather than forcing changes onto them.

*Translated from "Tokushu: Chu-Ro no bocho shugi — Teikokushugi no sairai / Teikokushugi no genei wo ou kuni to osoreru (Feature: The Expansionism of China and Russia: The Second Coming of Imperialism? / The Legitimacy of an International Order is Put to the Test —Countries Chasing the Illusion of Imperialism and Others Afraid of the Illusion)," Chuokoron, August 2014, pp. 76–81. (Courtesy of Chuo Koron Shinsha) [June 2014]*

---

## NAKANISHI Hiroshi

Born in Osaka Prefecture in 1962, Nakanishi Hiroshi graduated from the Faculty of Law at Kyoto University and completed a master's degree at Kyoto University's Graduate School of Law. Published titles by Nakanishi include *Kokusai seiji-toha nanika* ("What Is International Politics?" — a winner of the Yomiuri-Yoshino Sakuzo Award) and *Kokusai seiji-gaku* ("International Politics" — a joint work).

---