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STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT OF EAST ASIA IN 2017–18 ANALYSIS OF KEY TRENDS AND ISSUES

Looking from the perspective of late May 2018 (when this article was completed) the preceding 12 months look as a tumultuous period for East Asia’s international security environment. The ebb and flow of tension and détente which characterized many regional crisis (Korea being primary example) seemed to accelerate rising expectations of important shifts in some key issue areas shaping regional order. At the same time it seems that the underlying, long term, strategic background of power shift and perennial regional flashpoints comes out of this period not only unaltered, but even strengthened. This state of affairs creates a need for a complex analysis, taking into account both the underlying structure of East Asian international order and shifts brought by recent events.

This article is the second instalment in the series initiated by the “Strategic Review” in its 2017 edition. Its aim is to track the evolution of international security environment of particular regions by putting current events into a broader strategic context. It proceeds in the following order. First, it sketches out long term trends shaping the region’s strategic environment which together form a “strategic background” of international relations of East Asia. Second, key events of 2017 (and early months of 2018) are being analysed in relation to the aforementioned long-term trends. Finally, the author presents some remarks on the prospects for the region’s strategic evolution in the coming 12–18 months.

STRATEGIC BACKGROUND OF EAST ASIA’S INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Regional strategic background, as understood for the purpose of this article consists of (semi)permanent features of geopolitical setting, as well as long term trends in interactions among main strategic actors. This article deals with East Asia, which is understood as encompassing the land area bordering the West Pacific Basin. It includes such states and territories as: the Russian Far East, Japan, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Republic of Korea, People’s Republic of China, Republic of China (Taiwan), Mongolia and member states of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN – Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar) (Gawlikowski, 2004: 21). Three long term features characterize its geopolitical setting: high concentration of economic and mili-

tary power, low institutionalization of regional security cooperation and long term international conflicts.

East Asia's role in the global international system is a product of its economic prowess and growing militarization. In 2015 the wider Asia Pacific region accounted for 29% of global GDP and hosted 5 of the 20 biggest economies in the world (China, Japan, South Korea, Russia and Indonesia) (World Bank, 2015). This economic heft is being increasingly used to strengthen military arsenals. In 2016 East Asia was home to four of the 15 biggest defence spenders in the world (China, Russia, Japan and South Korea). Together they accounted for 22% of the global defence expenditures (*Trends in*, 2017). In consequence, East Asia is populated by strong nation states and several major powers which are the main actors shaping its international security environment. For that reason the key issues of international security in this region deal with inter-state relations. That is the reason why the analysis presented in this article focuses on great power relations and traditional (hard) security issues. Naturally, it doesn't mean that non-state actors and non-traditional security issues are absent from the regional agenda (especially in the sub region of South East Asia). However, it is the conscious decision of the author to focus on inter-state security relations as the focal point of regional security.

Another defining feature of East Asia's geopolitical setting is the relatively low level of institutionalization of security cooperation. East Asia lacks any regional organization which could be a regional pact under the provisions of the UN Charter's Chapter VIII. Several consultative fora exist (like the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit or Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building in Asia) and they tend to be rather inclusive in terms of membership. However, they lack norm making powers and enforcement mechanisms, thus limiting their ability to regulate interactions among regional actors. In the last couple of years the region has witnessed a greater activity in terms of institution building. It includes Chinese efforts at creating a new regional institutional architecture centred on the Belt and Road Initiative and including such entities as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and Belt and Road Forum. On the other hand, the re-launch of the Quadrilateral Dialogue ("the Quad") among Australia, India, Japan and United States might sow the seeds for further institutionalisation of these states' security cooperation. Even if not all activities are strictly security related, they can provide basis for increased future cooperation and coordination in this realm. Although these initiatives will be more closely analysed in further parts of the article, it is important to note at this point that they can be viewed not as attempts at creating inclusive region-wide institutions, but rather as the region's dominant powers – US and China- building competing institutions.

The final defining feature of (semi)permanent geopolitical setting in East Asia is the presence of numerous long standing international disputes and conflicts. They can be broadly divided into three categories 1) unresolved cold war conflicts (the division of China and Korea) 2) territorial disputes (mostly of maritime nature) 3) broader rivalry for politico-military dominance in the region. These disputes and conflicts touch on vital national security interests of the region's most important actors, which often make them the central issues in bilateral (and sometimes multilateral) relations. This dynamic is visible in the cases of Korean conflict (currently revolving around North

Korea's nuclear and missile arsenal) and the South China Sea (with growing Chinese militarisation of disputed features and increasing military activity of concerned parties). During the last couple of years intensity of both conflicts has oscillated between heightened tensions and signs of tentative détente. This has been especially visible in the Korean case (as will be described in greater detail later in the article). Preliminary conclusion drawn from these observations is that despite many twists and turns the situation on the ground changes little, reinforcing the conflicts' position as relatively permanent features of the regional security environment. However, it can be claimed that current trends reinforce the position of states considered as revisionist towards the existing regional order.

The previous section has named (semi)permanent features of East Asia's geopolitical setting. They all reinforce the point (adopted as one of the base assumptions for this article) that East Asia's regional security environment is the domain of traditional interstate relations revolving around rather traditional security issues of territorial control, competition for influence and military build-ups. Such geopolitical setting can be viewed as a metaphorical strategic chessboard on which a dynamic game of international relations is being played. Looking from a broad perspective, two trends in this game stand out. One is the growing bipolarity, with China and USA as main protagonists. Second concerns the attempts of lesser powers at maintaining at least some degree of independence and diplomatic "breathing space" in this bipolar environment.

Practically every analysis of the global balance of power shows that United States and China are the only two states which currently possess superpower potential (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2015; Wiśniewski, Hensarling, 2015). There is even a growing tendency to profess imminent global bipolar power configuration (Heisbourg, 2018). Such far reaching assessments may seem premature when it comes to the global level. However, it is far less contentious to perceive US and China as dominant actors in the East Asian region. China clearly does not have a peer competitor among regional states and can increasingly play this role vis-à-vis United States. Sino-US rivalry has a long history. However, it is widely argued that it entered new phase somewhere around years 2008–2012 when the financial crisis combined with change of guard at the top of the Chinese Communist Party brought a more assertive Chinese bid for leadership and construction of regional order. Looking at the current state of East Asian international security environment we can see growing Sino-US divergence concerning attitudes towards regional international order. Both states clearly champion competing visions of East Asia's future. This plays out at several levels. First, China is no longer shy about articulating alternative set of principles on which international order should be based. They centre around a desire for political and ideational pluralism, understood as a freedom of sovereign nation states to maintain distinct political and economic models. This stands in contrast with consistent US desire to promote liberal values around the world (Feng Zhang, 2018). Alternative visions of political order are accompanied by different models of economic development. Takashi Terada describes the as market and developmental models (Terada, 2018). The differences have been made even clearer when the Trump administration proposed "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" as its vision for the region's future. The concept is still vague. However, basically it seems to restate the well-known tenets of America-lead liberal institutional order (such as

freedom of navigation, rule of law, free market economy etc.) supplemented with new found emphasis on sovereignty and independence. All of this is being positioned as opposite to more “closed” Chinese vision (Smith, 2018; Ford, 2018).

These competing visions bring separate institutional initiatives. Each of the main players proposes its own set of institutions and cooperation initiatives which look increasingly as aimed at excluding one another. Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank is the prime example of this. It is often viewed in Washington as undermining World Bank and Asian Development Bank (although the reality on the ground is significantly different). The entire Belt and Road Initiative is also perceived as a starting point for a separate trading bloc, which with time can spawn its own organizational architecture. When coupled with unrelenting arms race and growing adversarial mindset it is clear that East Asian is becoming a playground for a bipolar great power competition with most (if not all) regional issues, disputes and conflicts subsumed into this bipolar structure.

This trend towards domination of regional affairs by two greatest powers was discernible for most of the post-cold war period. Thus, it is not surprising that it has created the second countervailing tendency – for region’s lesser powers to seek greater autonomy and freedom of action in this constraining environment. This had been visible in South Korea’s attempts at achieving equilibrium between its treaty ally (US) on the one hand and the biggest trading partner (China) on the other. It was also one of the driving forces behind ASEAN’s strategy of great powers’ enmeshment through a web of regional consultative institutions (Goh, 2008). Even staunch US allies – Australia and Japan- developed elaborate economic relationships with China and actively sought additional trade and security partners. This tendency should be interpreted not only as an attempt to escape entrapment in dependence on two greatest powers but also as an expression of other powers’ new confidence and ambition to play an independent role in regional order. Japan seemed to have lost its chance to compete with China for regional leadership (at least for some time), but nevertheless consequently tries to maintain a position of an independent pole in the regional balance of power. East Asia’s middle powers, like South Korea, Australia or Indonesia have been eager to use the opportunities created by more open and relaxed post-cold war international environment to realise their potential as another generation of “rising powers.” Thanks to all this movement the current state of East Asia’ international security environment cannot be described as a simple story of ascendant Sino-US bipolarity taking over the entire stage. Other players are also working hard to strengthen their autonomy. This is visible in manoeuvring by both Pyongyang and Seoul around inter-Korean diplomacy, the adoption of revised TPP agreement, or even such moves as the resumption of Quadrilateral Dialogue or Japanese constitutional revision plans.

KEY EVENTS IN OF 2017–18 IN EAST ASIA AND THEIR IMPACT ON REGIONAL SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

I. New formula for US policy towards China. At the turn of 2017 and 2018 the Trump administration has published a package of strategic documents which is meant to set the parameters for US security policy both globally and regionally. It

consists of the National Security Strategy, National Defence Strategy (with only a short summary available publicly) and Nuclear Posture Review. All three are based on a common assessment of renewed great power competition as the defining characteristic of the current international security environment. Special attention has been given to China as potentially the most challenging (if not outright dangerous) competitor (*National Security Strategy*, 2017: 2, 45–46). It is hardly surprising, considering that, for a long time, China has been seen as the only state capable of joining US among the ranks of superpowers. There is also a long history of American anxiety about a Chinese challenge to American pre-eminence in Asian (and perhaps even global) order (Kai Liao, 2013). The famous “pivot to Asia” adopted by the Obama administration also recognised this reality and was clearly aimed at balancing the growing Chinese power (it might have also inadvertently heightened threat perceptions in Beijing; Feng Zhang, 2018: 16–17). In that sense, the newly adopted strategy can be viewed as a continuation of long term trajectory followed by US foreign policy. What is new and intriguing is the very explicit naming of China as a strategic competitor and outright malign influence in the region. While US policy adopted a hedging strategy towards China at least since the beginning of the 21st century it also avoided open branding of China as a threat. It seems that the Trump administration has abandoned this niceties in favour of blunt recognition of bilateral relationship’s adversarial character. Moreover, the confrontational rhetoric has been put to practice on the economic front in the form of threatening punitive tariffs on Chinese products and increasing hostility to Chinese investment in the US. Although the outcome of this significant trade tensions is still uncertain at the time of writing, this actions have wider implications for mid- and long-term trajectory of Sino-American relations. For the last two decades trade and investment have been the part of the bilateral relationship which accounted for stabilisation, managing tensions and growing cooperation. Business interests in the US were among prime supporters of more congenial relations with Beijing. It became something akin to an article of faith among observers that no matter how heated the disputes concerning a host of political and strategic issues, the depth of economic bonds and the scale of potential losses from its disruption will work as a brake on tensions spiralling out of control. Currently economic matters are becoming another focal point of US-China antagonism. That might make the overall relationship more unstable and confrontational in the future. It is relatively easy to ascribe this new dynamic to the peculiarities of the Trump administration and its intensive pursuit of new equilibrium in American international trade position. However, another aspect of this situation is the growing sentiment of resentment and mistrust towards China taking hold across US policy-making, business and opinion shaping circles.¹ This means that the spectre of a trade war may not recede with the future change of administration in Washington.

II. 19th Communist Party of China Congress and PRC’s new foreign policy assertiveness. The five-yearly Congress of the party ruling the PRC is definitely a domestic politics affair. However, the 19th Congress had important foreign policy

¹ This trend can be illustrated by the nature and tone of discourse on Sino-American relations taking place in United States and the wider West. It can be exemplified by such texts as: Buruma 2017, Rehman, Auslin, et. al 2018, The Economist 2018 b.

implications. This stems from three main factors: 1) it has cemented the power of Xi Jinping, thus ensuring that his vision and priorities will guide PRC's foreign policy in the coming years; 2) it provided a forum for the newly re-elected secretary general to present a vision of ambitious foreign policy designed to ensure China's place as one of the world's leading powers; 3) all of this happened in the background of a newly activist foreign and security policy marking the gradual abandonment of Deng Xiaoping's 28-character instruction. All three factors are naturally closely interlinked with one another. The congress has confirmed Xi Jinping's role as *hexin* ("core") of China's ruling party. There seems to be a consensus in the Chinese politics watching community that Xi Jinping has amassed personal power unseen in the PRC's political system since the times of Deng Xiaoping (or for some even from Mao Zedong's). By this he has also broken the tradition of collective leadership introduced by Deng Xiaoping. The vision of China's international role laid out by the secretary general in his hallmark speech is a clear brake with Deng Xiaoping's 28-character instruction which provided guidance for PRC's foreign policy for most of the last two decades. While this previous dictum suggested to "bide the time" "hide strength" and "keep a low profile," the new vision sets a clear goal for China to "[...] become a global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence" (Xi Jinping, 2017: 25). The speech also highlights: "[...] further rise in China's international influence, ability to inspire, and power to shape [...]" (*ibid.*: 6). This is clearly a vision of a confident and ascendant state which is willing and able to take the role of a key world power. We can clearly see that this vision has already been put into practice. It is worth to name three examples of what I would call China's newly activist and assertive foreign and security policy. First, in May 2017 Beijing has hosted the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. Although the meeting itself didn't bring significant breakthroughs (Tiezzi, 2017) it was a mighty display of scale and ambition standing behind this signature project. Since being first proposed in 2013 the BRI (under changing names) has been seen as not only an economic undertaking but also a geopolitical project. If fully realized it could lead to the creation of China centered economic block spanning large swathes of Eurasia. Second, 2017 has witnessed the opening of China's first permanent overseas military base in Djibouti. Sitting alongside a similar American facility (with neighborly relations growing complicated recently; Trevithik, 2018a) it is a living proof of China's desire to project military power beyond its immediate neighborhood. Coupled with other military developments, like a dynamic aircraft carrier program or the increase in marine infantry forces, it points towards greater emphasis on expeditionary operations and power projection in China's defence policy. Finally 2017 and 2018 brought increased militarization of China-claimed features in the South China Sea. Contradicting previous statements by Chinese leaders, significant military capabilities have been placed in the area. (Trevithik, 2018b) They not only increase People Liberation Army's ability to potentially restrict aerial and maritime navigation in the SCS, but also indicate that Beijing is no longer that much concerned about projecting a benign image of a "peacefully rising" country. To summarize, Chinese policy is evolving towards great power confidence and ambitious overseas overtures. This raises concern in the US and other regional countries which leads to aforementioned changes in their regional strategies.

III. The unceasing Korean nuclear crisis. 2017 had been a year of increased tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Their primary cause was the apparent addition of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and thermonuclear weapons into North Korea's arsenal. This in turn brought escalating rhetoric and so called "maximum pressure" from United States motivated by the Trump administration's desire to deny Pyongyang the ability to hit US mainland. It is not the purpose of this article to recount all the twists and turns of missile tests, threats, counterthreats and then the sudden breakout of détente brought by first inter-Korean summit in a decade, quickly followed by a promise of first DPRK-US leaders' summit (whose actual conclusion remained uncertain at the time of the writing). The question I will try to answer is: what are the implications of these changes for East Asia's international security environment? First and foremost (as predicted in the previous instalment of this series) North Korea seems to become a mature nuclear power. Naturally, it is impossible to verify with certainty whether new ICBMs and thermonuclear warheads are truly operational. Nevertheless, tests conducted in 2017 make it plausible and other actors seem to operate under assumption that they are real. This significantly increases DPRK's ability to deter potential threats to its regime's survival. Despite many hints at the possibility of a pre-emptive strike, United States refrained from any meaningful military action against the North. This should be explained by US leaders' unwillingness to risk a nuclear attack on their homeland. The argument put forward in last year's article seems to hold water – North Korea's growing nuclear arsenal is actually increasing the stability on the Korean Peninsula (at least in the short to medium term) by maximising all actors' preference for the maintenance of the territorial and political status quo. Naturally, we need to take into account the potential for miscalculation and further nuclear proliferation in response to Pyongyang's advances. Kim Jong Un's regime willingness to engage in dialogue with Seoul and Washington is a sign of this newly acquired confidence. Having increased his regime's chances of survival, the supreme leader decided to deescalate tensions and make far-reaching offers of potential (if still not precisely specified) future concessions (like the denuclearization of the Peninsula). Such a move gives the North Korean regime several benefits: it lowers the overall tensions and threat levels, improves state's and leader's international image and potentially creates discord in opposing alliances (US, South Korea, Japan). There is a near consensus among Korea watchers that actual prospects for incoming talks ending with denuclearisation are slim if not outright non-existent. The reason for that is the nuclear arsenal's role as a guarantor of regime survival. For that reason the intense North-South diplomacy might be viewed as a part of the overarching trend towards lesser powers seeking more autonomy from the region's growing bipolarity. By acquiring a semblance of an effective deterrent vis-à-vis United States and taking the initiative in inter-Korea relations Kim Jong Un's regime has not only further insulated itself from American pressure, but also increased its autonomy from its only treaty ally – People's Republic of China. For some time it seemed that Chinese leadership had been increasingly impatient with Pyongyang's belligerence and tried (at least symbolically) to distance itself from its troublesome ally. China has subscribed to new strict sanctions against North Korea (even if their full implementation has been the subject of some serious doubts; Panda, 2017). This seemed to start changing with resumption of high level visits between the two states, as seen in Kim Jong Un's two visits in China

taking place in the first half of 2018 (Tiezzi, 2018). It can be argued that new military capabilities have decreased Pyongyang's reliance on implicit (or maybe speculative) Chinese security guarantees, while the newly initiated détente fulfilled some of the Chinese expectations. Simultaneously both approaches reinforced Kim Jong Un's position as an independent leader who himself decides when to threaten the world and when to extend an olive branch. At the same time, South Korean government of president Moon Jae-in has become an active player, virtually setting the agenda and leading its American ally to follow it. It is difficult to expect that South Korean authorities genuinely believe that the talks will lead to lasting peace and denuclearisation. However, they strengthen president Moon Jae-in's domestic position and allow the Republic to be an active player shaping its international environment rather than a bystander waiting for decisions taken in Washington or Beijing.

IV. The resumption of Quadrilateral Dialogue. In November 2017 an India-Australia-Japan-U.S. Consultations on Indo-Pacific have been held in Manila, on the side lines of East Asia Summit. Although the meeting itself didn't produce ground breaking conclusions it had attracted a lot of interest. This is primarily because it signifies a return to Quadrilateral Dialogue (popularly known as the Quad) between major Indo-Pacific powers. This initiative enjoyed a short life a decade ago and then disappeared for quite a long time (Madan, 2017). For quite some time change from a hub-and-spoke system of bilateral US alliances towards a multilateral format has been advocated (Tow, Auslin, et al., 2008). A mismatch between partners' foreign and domestic policy priorities seemed to be the main obstacle to its realization. The main issue with the Quad is that at its core (and despite loud protestations) it should be viewed as an anti-China coalition. That is the reason why it didn't work longer in its first iteration. In the regional security environment of the 21st century's first decade, most states put a premium on cooperating with China rather than appearing to actively balance it (Madan, 2017). However, now (as mentioned on several occasions in this article) the situation changed. All of the Quad's members feel a growing pressure from rising China. That probably provided rationale for reinstating the Dialogue. Regional effects of this restart can be summarised in several points: 1) it is a coup for US diplomacy, with more confrontational stance towards China in the offing, the Quad is a sign that Washington can at least start to build a coalition of like-minded states to support it 2) for the same reason Quad's re-emergence will only increase Chinese fears of encirclement by US and its allies, deepening the mutual mistrust and tensions. 3) paradoxically, for junior US allies (like Australia and Japan) the Quad might serve as a small step towards increasing their autonomy from superpower patron/partner. In a multilateral forum their negotiating position is stronger than in a purely bilateral interaction. Taking these three points into consideration, the Quad can be perceived at least in two ways. On the one side as another step towards building opposing politico-military blocs in bipolar East Asia. On the other as a means for lesser powers to both balance rising Chinese challenge and somewhat constrain or influence their potential or actual ally through a multilateral engagement. Above, all it must be remembered that little of substance has come out from Quad thus far. It might potentially lead to creation of a new regional security institution, as well as remain just an option for its participants to exercise or not, depending on the current situation.

V. Signing of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP-11). President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership is rightly considered to be the most momentous shift in Asia-Pacific policy instituted by his administration so far. TPP has been widely perceived as one of the pillars supporting Barack Obama's "pivot to Asia" strategy. If fully realized it would in effect create a huge trading bloc centred on United States providing a counterbalance to China's centrality in regional trade and investment. The fact that other 11 signatories decided to continue the negotiations and sign an amended agreement in March 2018 attests to the value this varied group of states puts in development of trade relations. Implications are several fold. It seems that regional states are eager to maintain and even deepen the bonds of economic interdependence in which they are deeply enmeshed. It has not escaped observers' attention that Asia-Pacific seems to be among world regions with the most positive view of economic globalization (*What*, 2018). At the same time the agreement has significant geopolitical underpinnings. Liberalisation of trade between its signatories creates an alternative for dependence on China as the main trading partner. This has certainly been an important consideration for Japan to promote the salvaging of TPP. At the same time by (surprisingly for many) successfully concluding the agreement despite US withdrawal, other signatories have shown their independence in driving the regional trade agenda. It is also noteworthy that the option for US to join the TPP-11 at a later date is still open, so in the future it may return as a US-led economic bloc.

VI. Accusations of Chinese interference in Australia's domestic politics. In December 2017 Australian politics has been rocked by a scandal centred on accusations of foreign (ie. Chinese) interference. Labour party senator Sam Dastyari was forced to resign after it emerged that he has received donations from a Chinese businessman which might have led him to adopt a strongly pro-China public stance. It later emerged that "foreign money" has found its way into pockets of more politicians across the political spectrum. (Harrison, 2017) This development might be viewed as local political drama not affecting the regional security environment of East Asia. However, I would argue that it is important, as a sign of a broader trend of stiffening attitudes towards China across several regional states. In the previous decade Beijing was on a "charm offensive" throughout the region, and a quite successful one for that matter. Chinese diplomacy had been successful in convincing many states to the sincerity of its "peaceful rise/development" concept. Even many US allies (like Australia) embraced growing economic ties with China and tried to perform a balancing act between these and their alliance commitments to United States. With time, however, attitudes changed. Australia is an interesting bellwether for this trends. It used to embrace China's rise (at least in economic terms) and actively court Chinese investments and immigrants. However, questions began to be raised about the relationship between these seemingly commercial or private actors and the Chinese party-state. Investment coming from the PRC has been increasingly viewed with suspicion as a way to take control of Australia's strategic assets (Harrison, 2017). The Dastyari scandal shed greater focus on what "The Economist" calls "China's sharp power" (*At the sharp*, 2017). It basically amounts to exercising different levers of non-state influence to shape public debate in other states in ways conducive to Beijing's interests and preferences. The wider

lesson from this episode is that China's growing foreign policy assertiveness creates a growing pushback in states which used to be susceptible to PRC's charm offensive. This might be taken as an argument that Beijing's more confrontational policy is self-defeating as it increases regional support for US efforts to balance China.

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Analysis presented in the preceding section confirms that the international security environment of East Asia is currently shaped by two main trends: growing Sino-US bipolarity and lesser powers' efforts at achieving greater autonomy. Attitudes of Beijing and Washington towards one another (as expressed in official policy pronouncements) are growing more antagonistic. Both states clearly strive for dominance in the region, as expressed by opposing visions expressed in respectively Belt and Road Initiative and Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Growing anxiety about overt and covert Chinese influence, as evidence in the Australian political scandal, is strengthening polarisation as US allies and partners close ranks with Washington to balance the looming Chinese juggernaut. Quad's revival is another sign of this trend. On the other hand (as already mentioned) it can be viewed as a mechanism enhancing junior partner's negotiating leverage in dealings with Washington. Similarly, the conclusion of CPTPP can be viewed as a sign of both overarching trends. On the one hand, a group of regional states has successfully concluded a far reaching trade agreement without any of the two major powers. On the other, the option of US joining the pact is still open, thus in the future it can become the basis for a US-led trade block competing with one centred on China. On the Korean peninsula, both governments engage in intense diplomatic manoeuvring in order to increase their autonomy from major power patrons.

Taken together all these developments paint a picture of a region in flux. It clearly has two main power centres and several major/middle powers manoeuvring to maintain their autonomy and protect their interests. Instead of a clear prognosis regarding the future of East Asia's international security environment the author would like to pose four questions. The answer to them will have great impact on the region's future.

1. What is the essence of Trump administration's adversarial stance towards China?
It is important to note that current administration's attitude to Beijing contains elements of both bold confrontation and gestures of goodwill signifying willingness to maintain cooperation. This is most visible in the on and off threats of tariffs and trade war. This sits oddly alongside confrontational rhetoric of the National Security Strategy which suggests that the antagonism is being motivated by deeply opposing visions of regional order. The question is whether satisfaction of Trump administration's expectations regarding the trade imbalance can lead to accommodation with China? If that were the case, that would paved the way to a more harmonious relations between the region's dominant powers. If not that might mean that the future truly holds a bipolar contest for dominance over East Asia.
2. Will the current state of economic openness prevail? Economic interdependence is among primary factors increasing the stability of East Asia's international security environment. It has consistently worked as a brake on tensions and conflicts. However, if the region would increasingly divide into relatively closed trading blocs

(based for example on BRI and CPTPP) this could create a more escalation-prone environment. Current economic tensions between USA and China are potentially of great importance, because they undermine the most cooperative aspect of the bilateral relationship. Business interests used to mitigate bellicose instincts on both sides. Now economic issues become another (perhaps even central) point of contention.

3. How will the future institutional architecture of the region look like? It has already been mentioned that East Asia lacks robust and inclusive regional institutions (especially in the security sphere). At the same time we are witnessing at least several initiatives which can lead to creation of new institutions – like BRI, CPTPP and the Quad. In order to increase regional stability they would need to be inclusive and specifically reach across the emerging bipolar divide. However, there is a clear danger that both sides in this divide will increasingly build their own competing institutions thus exacerbating the potential for further destabilisation.

Answers to these questions remain open. The general picture of East Asia's international security environment in the middle of 2018 is relatively stable, with conscious efforts of almost all major powers to limit tensions. However, the trends outlined in this article point toward significant potential for increased strategic rivalry in the not so distant future.

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ABSTRACT

The international security environment of East Asia is undergoing dynamic changes. This article is another instalment in a series of analysis initiated by the “Strategic Review” in 2017. It deals with international security situation in various regions. The article’s main aim is to present the influence of selected international events of 2017’s second half and 2018’s first half on the evolution of East Asia’s long term international security environment. In order to achieve this aim the author has posed two research questions: what long term trends have the strongest influence on international security environment of East Asia? and, do key events of 2017–18 increase or decrease stability of the regional security environment? Following research methods have been adopted to solve this research problem: the comparative method, legal-institutional analysis and forecasting method based on identification of key trends shaping the evolution of the studied phenomenon. The main conclusions are twofold. First, the most important long term trends shaping the international security environment of East Asia are, on the one side, the growing bipolarity of the regional order (with US and PRC as main protagonists) and, on the other side, other player’s attempts to increase the degree of their own autonomy. The events of 2017–18 show that almost all regional powers act to limit the tensions. It doesn’t change the fact that long term trends point towards a growing confrontation of two contradictory visions of regional order – one championed by USA, and the other by PRC.

Keywords: East Asia, great power rivalry, international security

ŚRODOWISKO STRATEGICZNE AZJI WSCHODNIEJ 2017–2018. ANALIZA KLUCZOWYCH TRENDÓW I ZAGADNIENÍ

STRESZCZENIE

Międzynarodowe środowisko bezpieczeństwa Azji Wschodniej podlega obecnie dynamicznym przemianom. Niniejszy artykuł stanowi kolejną edycję serii analiz sytuacji bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego w poszczególnych regionach świata zainicjowanej w 2017 r. przez „Przeгляд Strategiczny”. Jego zasadniczym celem jest ukazanie wpływu wybranych wydarzeń międzynarodowych drugiej połowy 2017 i pierwszej połowy 2018 r. na długoterminową ewolucję międzynarodowego środowiska bezpieczeństwa Azji Wschodniej. Dla jego osiągnięcia autor postawił dwa pytania badawcze: jakie długoterminowe trendy w największym stopniu kształtują międzynarodowe środowisko bezpieczeństwa Azji Wschodniej?, jak również: Czy kluczowe wydarzenia okresu 2017–2018 wzmacniają czy też zmniejszają stabilność międzynarodowego środowiska bezpieczeństwa badanego regionu? Dla rozwiązania tak zakreślonego problemu badawczego posłużono się metodą porównawczą, analizą prawnoinstytucjonalną oraz metodą prognostyczną opartą na identyfikacji kluczowych trendów kształtujących ewolucję badanego zjawiska. Zasadnicze konkluzje sprowadzają się do dwóch punktów. Po pierwsze, najważniejszymi długoterminowymi trendami kształtującymi międzynarodowe środowisko bezpieczeństwa Azji Wschodniej, są z jednej strony rosnąca dwubiegunowość ładu regionalnego (z udziałem USA i ChRL), a z drugiej dążenie pozostałych graczy do zwiększenia zakresu własnej

autonomii. Wydarzenia okresu 2017–18 pokazują, iż prawie wszystkie potęgi regionalne dążą do ograniczenia napięć. Nie zmienia to jednak faktu, iż długoterminowe trendy wskazują na rosnącą konfrontację dwóch sprzecznych wizji ładu regionalnego – jedną proponowaną przez USA, a drugą przez ChRL.

Słowa kluczowe: Azja Wschodnia, bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe