

Russia's Place in the Changing Strategic Triangle in the Post-Cold War Northeast Asia: From an Outcast to a Strategic Player?*

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This paper is an attempt to analyze Russia's regional political place and power in Northeast Asia through the US-China-Russia triangularity and to forecast the future of Russia's place in the region by applying the basic logic and concepts of social network theory such as "social capital" and "structural hole." From Russia's perspective, the structural hole that formulated as a result of its own de-link strategy in the 1990s has developed into a determining factor in disabling Russia from regaining its position and influence in the Northeast Asian region. To overcome this obstacle, Russia has continuously developed its diplomatic strategies and reviewed the potential for cooperating with the US. Nonetheless, the US-Russian rivalry and competition at the global level is severely damaging an opportunity for the coming of a stable and cooperative order in Northeast Asia. However, the works of the US utilizing Russia without excluding China, and establishment of a vision for a regional order in the context of fostering stability and cooperation will become an utmost important factor in developing peace and co-prosperity in Northeast Asia. A sort of a semi-triangularity among the US-China-Russia seems more beneficial for regional stability and cooperation.

Keywords: *Strategic Triangle, Social Network Theory, Russia, US, China, Northeast Asia*

1. INTRODUCTION

A recent debacle in the Crimea region and Russia's intervention in Syria have tightened the tension between the West and Russia, on both European regional level and on an international level. Most of the developing analysis and literature sees the Crimea and Syrian issues from the perspective of a conventional US-Russia geopolitical collision, and the geopolitical rivalry over the region.¹ Such perspective fails to analyze the situation beyond

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¹ For example, see: Andrew Foxall. "A 'New Cold War': Re-drawing the MAP/map of Europe." *Political Geography* 28(2009):329-331; Alexander Lukin. "What the Kremlin Is Thinking: Putin's Vision for Eurasia." *Foreign Affairs* July/August 2014; G. John Ikenberry. "The Illusion of Geopolitics: The Enduring Power of the Liberal Order." *Foreign Affairs* May/June 2014; Joseph S. Nye. "Putin's Calculus." *Project Syndicate* (2014.04.10); Joseph S. Nye. "A Western Strategy for a Declining Russia." *Project Syndicate* (2014.09.03); John Mearsheimer. "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin." *Foreign Affairs* Sep/Oct 2014; Robert Legvold. "Managing the New Cold War" *Foreign Affairs* July/August 2014; Walter Russell Mead. "The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers." *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 93 Issue 3 (2014): 69-79; The Saker, "US Impotence and Russia's Intervention in Syria: A Watershed Return to International Diplomacy?" *Global Research* (October 29, 2015).

the traditional Cold War framework, and therefore lacks originality and suitability. However, when analyzed via the network theory, one can see the possibility of developing a more flexible analysis of the Crimea issue in terms of Russia's intents and the realization of its goals. In similar vein, the task of analyzing Russia's place and interest in Northeast Asia and within the framework of the US-China-Russia triangularity is of grave importance and merit. This paper is an attempt to analyze Russia's regional political place and power in Northeast Asia through the US-China-Russia triangularity and to forecast the future of Russia in the region by applying the basic logic and concepts of social network theory such as "social capital" and "structural hole."

Russia's influence in Northeast Asia rapidly diminished during and after the post-Cold War era. Russia's place in the region was simply lost along with its status and the region seemed to be in the hands of Russia's former competitions, China and the US with the advent of Rise of China and the aggressive proliferation of American foreign policy in the region. Such bipolarity contributed to the construction of currently standing regional order, and consequently, most of academia's interests and focus shifted to analyzing and building literature on US-China relations, largely neglecting to give attention to Russia. Surely, examining the status and forecasting the future of Northeast Asia from the perspective of US-China relations has its merits and do provide understandable analytical devices, the analytical framework so deeply embedded in the relations between the Rise of China and the American hegemony with complete inconsideration of Russia's potentials has its limits; though it is a nonsensical and unrealistic overstatement to argue that Russia is the sole paramount important player in shaping regional politics in Northeast Asia, the sheer fact that Russia has potential to influence the future US-China relations is an important point to address and enough reason not to ignore.

China's comprehensive national power and its financial and diplomatic influence in the region are continuously closing the gap with that of the US. It is likely that in order for the two great powers to reach equilibrium or overturn the pro-American status quo, it will take a considerable amount of time. Hence, both powers are paying a great deal of effort on "picking sides" with key regional players. In this context, the sheer existence of the US-China rivalry may not be as important as the decisions and opinions of the key regional players, such as Russia, Japan and the two Koreas. This is the very reason why Russia's recent New Eastward Policy, an attempt to expand its interests and influences in Northeast Asia, deserves more attention for an appropriate understanding of Russia's regional positional power and its possible shifts.

To achieve its research goal, this paper focuses primarily on answering the following three sets of questions:

The first set of questions attempt to seek clues to the existing aperture between Russia's continual efforts to rebound to Northeast Asia and the relative unfruitfulness of its efforts to achieve tangible achievements. That is, why is there a disparity between Russia's comprehensive national powers versus its regional influence in Northeast Asia? Regarding the role of Russia in Northeast Asia, the dominant opinions of the so-called "Western" academia remain rather negative and pessimistic. Even within the circle of Asian scholarship, literatures such as "The End of Eurasia" circulates, discussing the declining power of Russia. Needless to mention, Russia indeed lost its status as a superpower after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. However, managing to tackle the task of multi-level system transformation in the 2000s, Russia is on course to recover its once lost status of geopolitical strong hand in the international scene and especially the status as a main strategic player at

least in the Eurasian region. Its ambition to regain its status as a 'global power' is rather very noticeable, yet there has not been a meaningful and tangible results.

The second set of questions are primarily concerned with the lack of strategic interactions between the US and Russia in the Northeast Asian region, despite the logical importance and significance of such bilateral relations. Frankly, there are ample amount of literature on the strategic relationships among the key players in Northeast Asia, focusing largely on the US, China, Japan, and Russia. A considerable portion of such literature analyzes the strategic relationships in triangularity, identifying the key triangles in the regions as the US-China-Japan, US-China-Russia, China-Japan-Russia, and US-Russia-Japan. Nonetheless, most of the current literature showed tendency to not focus on the US-China-Russia triangularity, which naturally leaves many pondering why it has yet to receive enough attention despite having an important strategic characteristics.² Russia and the US seldom made strategic interactions in the post-Cold War period, especially in the Northeast Asia region despite its grave importance. While at the global level, derivatives of Russia's "reset policy" showed commitment to patching problems surrounding the MD issues, mediating the European interests of gains and losses, and arbitrating the Middle East crisis in Iran and Syria.³ What accounts for this particular lack?

The last set of questions explore the implications of Russia's efforts and the opportunities that Russia can provide to the US and China in their Northeast Asia strategies and how Russia will go about achieving its goals. What is known to us right at this period in history is that Russia is one of the central strategic figures along with the US, EU, and China in shaping the global security and/or military order, not to mention the international energy relations. Again, Russia's endeavor to regain its status and influence in Northeast Asia, which has largely diminished during the 1990s, was shown through its so-called "Eastward Policy." This policy appeared firstly during the Medvedev Administration, though the full-scale promotion of the policy became apparent during the third Putin Administration along with a promotion of a new national slogan, "Euro-Pacific State." Clearly, Russia's Eastward efforts are not only affecting the Northeast Asian regional politics, but also the central axis in determining the regional politics, the US-China relations.

2. STRATEGIC TRIANGLE AND THE NETWORK APPROACH

This research utilizes hints acquired from applying the social network theory on analyzing Russia's place and role in Northeast Asia. The basic logic and explanation

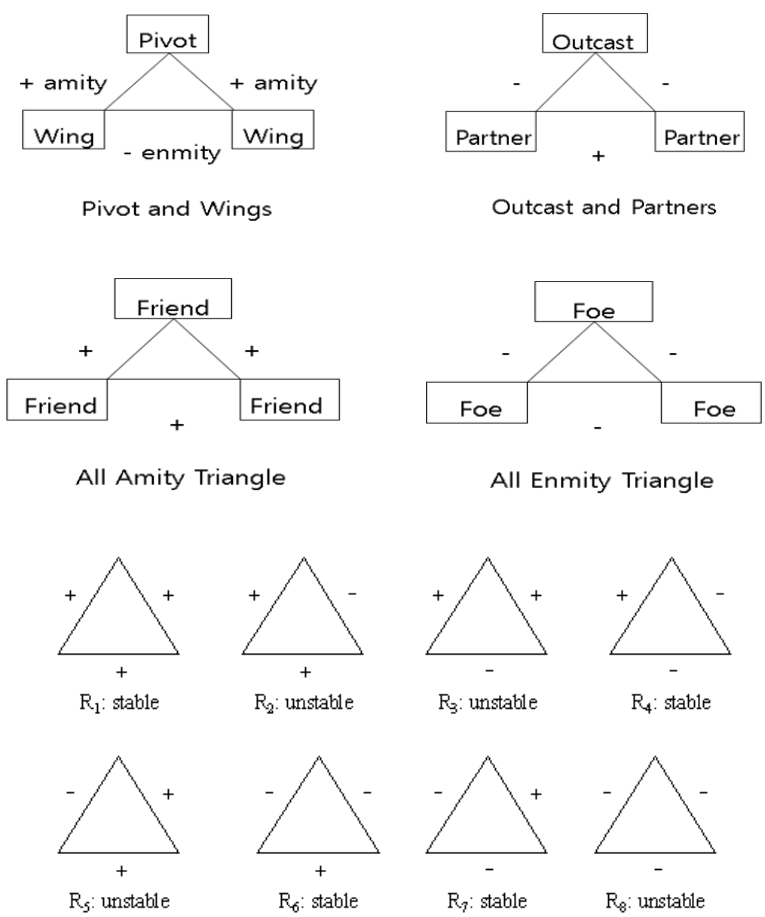
² Here, strategic relations refer to a relationship constructed because of combining strategic cooperation with strategic competition. It represents a relation in which the interactions of the two countries could influence the basic political structure of their residing region or international politics. It is these countries, which are labeled 'strategic player'. Therefore, countries that can formulate these relations must secure a network power that can not only acquire enough material power, but also systemize others' relationships. Further, the strategic cooperation relations represent a state of alliance, economic solidarity, and strategy mediation homogenization. In this research, strategic relations will focus primarily on Northeast Asia, more so than on the global level.

³ As examples, others may use Russia's role in UN sanctions on North Korea or its participation in PSI. However, it seems more appropriate to understand this as Russia's commitment to the global efforts in nonproliferation of nuclear weapons.

framework from the social network theory provides a particularly useful tool in approaching the question of why Russia has yet to gain a full-fledged status and influence in the region, and also in explaining that Russia is an important variable in creating a new strategic triangularity in the region. Triangle relation can be regarded as the smallest network in the sense that dyadic relations can be influenced not by the two parties themselves but by the third party. This relation attracted the attention especially among strategic study specialists. The strategic triangle relations has been studied from the cold war era by Lowell L. Dittmer (1981, 2005), W. Thompson (1995), etc.

Typically, the existing research classify the key players' strategic triangularity in the following four manners:

Figure 1. Four Types of Triangularity and Stability



Source: Yu-Shan Wu, "Power Shift, Strategic Triangle, and Alliances in East Asia," *Issues and Studies* 47(4) (December 2011): 1-42; Cheng-Feng Shih, "American Policy toward Taiwan: From the Past into the Future," <http://mail.tku.edu.tw/cfshih/def5-2-020617.htm> (accessed: 2015/02/ 04).

Above four types of triangularity are applicable to the situation in Northeast Asia. <Figure 1>, otherwise known as the "Pivot and Wings" triangularity draws a case in which either the US or China is in lead of the flock, exerting amicable influence to two other main players in the region separately from each other on a bilateral basis. <Figure 1> draws a case in which Russia or China in strategic partnership excluding the US "All Amity Triangle" or the "All Enmity Triangle" which sees the regional order in Northeast Asia in a state of complete anarchy or complete partnership among the key players.

This type of research were especially useful when analyzing the relational structure of the Soviet Union, the US, and China at an international level. That is, it was a handy tool in describing the international relations of the Cold War when the world order was in the vibrant process of changing not only its character but also its structure. The triangular analysis showed that it is inevitable for two out of the three players engaged in a strategic triangularity to regulate the acts of the remaining players. A recent study (Wu, 2011) depicts the evolution of the dynamics of abovementioned triangularities throughout the Cold War era and the post-Cold War era.

Nonetheless, the very fact that such triangle analysis' applicability was useful mainly for describing the international relations of the Cold War era has severe limits in applicability to the post-Cold War era, especially in the context of Northeast Asia. Among many, there are four significant limits of such analysis. First, to define the US-China-Russia relations as a strategic triangularity, Russia in post-Cold War Northeast Asia lacked equilateral exertion of influence and power, not to mention the lack of any foundational and firm grounds to be compared with the US and China in the region at the same level. Second, this kind of analysis is especially limiting in a sense that it cannot explain a situation when a single player exerts unilateral influences to the remaining players on an individual basis. Third, it is extremely difficult and vague to explain the disparity between the international level of triangularity with the regional level of triangularity.⁴ Furthermore, strategic triangularity limits analysis of non-key players' actions and their relationship with the key superpowers and their subsequent influence over regional politics. This ultimately leads to limiting the level of analysis to only that of the superpowers, thereby severely underestimating the potential exertion of influence of small-to-medium level players in the region.⁵

In contrast to the conventional triangularity-based analysis, the network approach provides very useful framework to explain the changing dynamics of international relations and regional politics of Northeast Asia. Specifically, the network approach shows a comprehensive blueprint of structures and players' interactions by understanding international relations as either anarchical or hierarchical. In that sense, this approach allows

⁴ For instance, <Figure 1> which shows a US-led pivot-wings triangularity is a useful tool in explaining the US' leadership in both regional and international political arena. Nonetheless, this particular triangularity comes short of explaining the East Asian situation in the 1970s when the US kept its strategic cooperation with the Soviet Union at an international level, but not at the regional level. Therefore, the pivot-wings triangularity is ill suited in explaining the disparity between the double-pointed directions of US policies.

⁵ This criticism is significant especially in the context of Northeast Asia because there are non-superpower players that do exert a great degree of influence in shaping regional politics and order, such as North Korea – while it would be inappropriate to determine that North Korea directly exerts its position and interests in the region in the process of constructing the regional order, its unascertained acts periodically puts the entire regional order in jeopardy.

keen observation of a player(s) changing the structure of the network, and simultaneously their positional power, as a result of casting links with others.

In this regard, this research focuses on the ‘relational configuration,’ or the ‘relational patterns’ formed in the midst of players’ interactions, as shown in the ‘social-network theory.’ In comparison to the macro structure of neorealism, this configuration is considered to be a ‘mid-ranged structure’. The logic of a ‘mid-ranged structure’ not only reflects the contents of the macro structure, but also it can encompass the structural changes that interact with the players’ choices. In understand and analyze the components and the functions of the mid-ranged structures, it is critical to grasp the idea of ‘social capital’ and ‘structure holes,’ which are found in the networks.⁶

This research defines ‘social capital’ as a network of three or more players that can create or develop a cooperative strategy, and ‘structural holes’ as a gap in the network that can be filled by strategically casting a link or two. This structural hole is often understood as a subject of strategic interaction that wishes to limit interactions in the network through brokerages. That is because the brokerage filling in the gaps acquires a vast amount of information in attempt to improve social capital, and its own positional power.

Furthermore, this research focuses on the theoretical discussion and the logic of ‘positional power’ as a mean of understanding the strategies of players in the web of networks. Here, ‘positional power’ refers to a network power that is created from one’s position in the network. The discussion on positional power goes beyond the traditional logic of ‘resource power’ that rely heavily on specific resources such as one’s military strength, economy, or dependent resources, and discusses the power created from the players’ interactions and the network structures created from such relationships. The utility of the positional power is that it draws the role of a broker that strategically uses structural holes found in the network from a perspective of a power theory.

By applying such accomplishments of the social network theory, this research is useful in explaining the strategies of so-called, “yet-to-be-key countries” in the region, like Russia. Frankly, existing researches conceived countries like Russia in players-fixed levels of analysis, hence coming short of understanding one’s range of strategies and acts. In this context, the concepts such as structural holes and positional power not only identify the structural attributes of middle-power nations’ potential in Northeast Asia, but also help in providing specific discussions on the role of the middle-power nations in the current status quo. Moreover, social network theory provides a useful analytical framework that explains the gap between Russia’s global status and its regional status. Among many, understanding the structural holes and positional power shown as results of changes in Russia’s links with the regional powers (including the US) is very useful in evaluating Russia’s influence, and also its potentials and future in Northeast Asia in the context of its linking policies.

⁶ Burt (1992, 2005) understood the strength of an integrated network as ‘social capital,’ and the weakness of the divided network as ‘structural holes’. The former has high potentials of institutionalization as result of players’ repeated and continual interactions, and is culturally homogeneous, therefore, players have higher change to form common understanding, agreed framework, and lower chance of division, holes, and mediation. The latter case, however, have a much more coarse or loose links with each other, therefore, players are only connected indirectly, and their relations are unofficial, unorganized, non-continuous, which has a higher chance of leading to dissonance and severance in relations. The latter case satisfies a warrant that norms and rules that organized interactions within a network can clash from time to time.

3. RUSSIA'S NETWORK STRATEGY TOWARDS NORTHEAST ASIA

Russia's Network Strategy towards Northeast Asia has changed throughout the years. Generally and intuitively, it has largely been regarded that Russia has lost its place and interest in Northeast Asia since it lost touch with it during and after the Cold War. Nevertheless, to make accurate analysis and forecast on Russia's future and its potential in the region, it is important to discuss and understand how the interactions of Russia's linking strategies and the corresponding strategies of China and the US have unfolded.

This paper seeks to make this analysis by briefly tracing the history of Russia's interactions with other key players in Northeast Asia since the 1970s. Mainly, there are four important periods that allow effective tracing of Russia's roles throughout the last 60 years: 1) 1970s-1990; 2) 1990s; 3) 2000s; and 4) 2010s. Such historical reflection reveals a wide array of interpretations and paths in which how relational configurations have shifted and their implications.

3.1 1970s-1990: Russia Loses Touch with Northeast Asia

The period between 1970s and 1980s marked the shift of relationship between Moscow and Beijing, from a euphoric and mutual assurance of partnership to an increasingly inflated distaste in each other and irreconcilable piquancy. In accordance with an ample amount of literature, this paper also suggests the change of US attitudes and policy towards China as an independent variable in ultimately shifting the ties between Russia and China in between the noted years.

The Sino-Soviet bitterness built as result of US and China's mutual understanding with each other to conceive further involvement of the Soviet Union in constructing Northeast Asian regional order as a grave threat; whether it was Washington or Beijing itself that proliferated the Soviet threat perception, Beijing began to recognize the need to distance from Russia to remain as the sole geopolitical rising power in Northeast Asia, and Washington partially succeeded in pushing Russia away from Northeast Asia ironically (or strategically) by partnering with Beijing, the rising Communist power. Certainly, Nixon's "ping pong diplomacy" which began in early 1970s was at works (Gittings, 1969; Garrett, 1979; Erickson, 1981; Burr, 2001).

Perhaps Moscow considered that making strategic distance with China and establishing a non-enmity relationship with the US would not threaten its ability to exert influence and retain its strategic player status in the region. In fact, it seemed that the US and the Soviet Union had been strategically cooperating with each other at a global level on necessary parts even during their competition before making the brief rapprochement, so such partial agreement to cooperate at the global level may have led to Moscow to consider regional cooperation (or at least non-enmity) would not generate any negative results. Had this been the case, Moscow made an irreparable mistake and its eventual retrenchment from Northeast Asia ultimately led to gradual marginalization for advancing further political and economic interests in the region as part of the Northeast Asian regional power (Radchenko, 2014).

US strategy to pivot in the romantic triangle with the Soviet Union and China succeeded namely in "managing to keep the relations with Moscow and Beijing better than the relationship with each other" (Wu, 2011), though it did not even last a decade. By 1981 when Reagan came into office in Washington, Deng Xiaoping in China had experienced a sudden

epiphany that the US-China relations had limits to paralleling interests.⁷ China's equidistant strategy to maintain strategic position in both its relations with the Soviet Union and the US won them the pivot's status that the US had held just a few years back.

In addition, by the early 1980s, the international community beyond Northeast Asian region was pointing fingers at the Soviet Union for various reasons. Among many, by the time, the Soviets had already invaded Afghanistan, the Carter Administration decided to withdraw from SALT II, hostile anti-Soviet sentiment among Americans spread dramatically, even leading the US to boycott the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Times leading up to the early 1980s were a hostile time and no room for rapprochement with the Soviet Union seemed to exist – at least until Gorbachev took office in Kremlin in 1985 (Wu, 2011). Almost immediately Gorbachev entered Kremlin, Soviet Union's foreign policy went under the knife and took a major change with “new thinking.”

Gorbachev began to show Soviet Union's commitment to improve its relations with its competitors in numerous ways. The most noteworthy and radical changes in the Soviet Union at the time were the Perestroika and Glasnost. Soviet Union's domestic reforms and the character in which it exhibited in doing so ultimately led to changing the course of its diplomatic history.

One example of such effort was its removal and withdrawal of Soviet troops from the Sino-Soviet and Mongolian borders, Afghanistan, and led the initiative to withdraw Vietnamese troops from Cambodia. Some argue that such actions were results of Gorbachev's willingness to hear opinions by Deng in China, though the decisions made during this period was namely Soviet Union's gradual efforts to return to the international community. Gorbachev's efforts spread to engaging in active summit talks with the US as well. Immediately after taking office, Gorbachev met with Reagan in 1985, in Geneva, where the two heads of state discussed, at the request of Gorbachev, the need to improve the socio-economic communication and exchanges between the two. The two realized that in order to do so, security competition would need to slow down.

The changes sought via “new thinking” certainly brought radical changes to the Soviet relations with China and the US. In the years leading up to 1990s, the Soviet Union and the United States had already signed the INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty) which eliminated the entire class of nuclear weapons, restricting the deployment of both intermediate and short range land-based missiles worldwide with an implementation of extension verification measures via intrusive inspections.⁸ Further, it had begun drafting the START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), which would later be signed in 1991. Though passive, the Sino-Soviet relations began to show gradual improvement in the 1980s as China became a reliable client for Soviet arms exports, making up 25-50% of all foreign military sales.⁹

The United States hails the reciprocation with the Soviet Union as the win of the century in fight against Communism, and an important step towards bringing an end to the Cold

⁷ Largely, Deng Xiaoping was dissatisfied with the normalization relations with the US due to US' arms sales to Taiwan and its reluctance to export sensitive technologies to China.

⁸ “Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), 1987,” *US Department of State Archive*. <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/rd/104266.htm>

⁹ Weitz, Richard, “Why China Snubs Russia Arms,” *The Diplomat*. <http://thediplomat.com/2010/04/why-china-snubs-russian-arms/>

War.¹⁰ Intuitively and conclusively, the stories of the 1980s are passed down as a tale of ultimate American success. Nonetheless, it is important to understand that the process of eventual failure of the Soviet Union in the Cold War had no clear leaders in and of itself; this research does not understate the American efforts in bringing end to the Cold War, rather it wishes to argue that there was no clear leading figure in the Cold War. Numerous domestic conditions, diplomatic misplacements, and mistakes of the Soviet Union had more profound impact on its self-destruction more so than the American diplomacy.

3.2 1990s: Russia's Rapid Decline in Northeast Asia

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia's power declined expeditiously as the US-led regional order became more eminent. The early 1990s was characterized by evidently divided legacy triangularities: the Northern triangularity (Soviet-China-North Korea), and the Southern triangular triangularity (US-Japan-ROK). However, it was difficult to forecast what kind of outcome the divided triangularities will bring to the Northeast Asian region with the legacy triangularities alone. At the time, the US had consultation links to discuss with Russia on topics of global security and other potential cooperation materials. Here, it is important to understand the difference between Russia's strategies at a global level and those at a regional level from the purview of the responding countries.¹¹

While it is largely true that after the 1970s, the improvement of the US-China relations countered the Soviet influences in Asia, at the global level, it was rather clear that the US and the Soviet had been strategically cooperating with each other on necessary parts even during their most competitive times. However, certainly, the strategic cooperation between the US and China deferred Soviet influence in the Northeast Asian region.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the sharp decline of Russian influence in the region were understood by the US as a pass to neglect Russia and treat it as an unimportant regional player. Thus, the US adopted strategies to further limit Russian influences from benefiting from the region. Typically, the US continually attempted to exclude Russia from addressing the North Korean nuclearization problem. However, as it turned out later, this did not work in favor of the US as the Russian exclusion proved to be an important structural hole in US' Northeast Asia policy.

Meanwhile, post-Cold War China was not in the situation to consider cooperation link with Russia, neither on a global level nor a Eurasian regional level. Instead, China was eyeing in on problems related to border adjustment issues and was busy writing policies

¹⁰ "Gorbachev and New Thinking in Soviet Foreign Policy, 1987-88," *US Department of State Archive*. <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/rd/108225.htm>

¹¹ On the development of security cooperation between US and Russia, see: Michael Cox, "The Necessary Partnership?: The Clinton Presidency and Post-Soviet Russia," *International Affairs* 70-4 (1994): 635-37; Steven Kull, "Co-operation or Competition: the Battle of Ideas in Russia and the USA," in James E. Goodby and Benoit Morel (eds.), *The Limited Partnership, Building a Russian-US Security Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): Chap. 12; Bill Clinton, "A Strategic Alliance With Russian Reform," *US Department of State Dispatch* 4-14 (1993): 191-92; Strobe Talbott, "US Must Lead a Strategic Alliance With Post-Soviet reform," *US Department of State Dispatch* 4-17 (1993). Nicholas Burns characterized the Clinton administration's policy toward Russia as participatory and incorporative policy. Nicholas Burns (*et als.*), "Three Years after the Collapse of the USSR: A Panel of Former and Current Policymakers," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 11-1 (1995).

attempting to establish a new relationship with Russia to replace an existing relations with Central Asian countries.

While Japan remained more sensitive about Russian influence on regional security than China, the level of sensitivity was not alarming. Therefore even when it had been racing its diplomatic efforts to catch a golden opportunity to solve the northern border issues, it was clear that Japan paid not enough attention to the possibility of Russian contribution to the regional politics.

South and North Korea were only attentive to the probability of Russian influence in the inter-Korean relations, though both Koreas came to a conclusion that Russia's influence on the world order is limited. South Korea's primary interests were in Russia's influence over North Korea; South Korea was looking for an opportunity to utilize its relations with Russia to exert negative influence on the survivability of the regime. One opportunity that the South was able to capture was linking with Russia through its northward policy. South Korea's Roh Tae-Woo Administration paved the way to begin positive relations with Russia to win leverage of the inter-Korean relations. However, it became evident that South Korea's motive behind linking with Russia was extremely selfish – that it was only to evaluate and utilize Russia as a passage of exerting influence, no other. Despite having no tangible benefits to gain, Russia's favorable position with South Korea deteriorated its relations with North Korea, and eventually, in 1996, the North Korea-Soviet Union alliance pact lost its effect. As it turned out, delinking with North Korea and continuing to build friendship with South Korea was a double-edged sword as Russia lost a key pathway to regaining influence in the regional politics (Titarenko, 2000: 165). Ironically, the end of the Russia-North Korea strategic relations meant the South Korea's loss of hope in Russia.

Ultimately, the explanation of Russia's rapid decline in Northeast Asia in the 1990s is twofold. First and foremost importantly, Russia's weakened hard power is a major factor. Experiencing a comprehensive regime shift through political democratization, economic marketization, and social diversification brought chaotic times to the Russian elites and people alike, forcing them to question their identity, and Russian foreign policy experienced a large change as it bounced back and forth between a pro-Western line and the Eurasianism line. Regime shift and the unclear foreign policy direction were key factors in the deterioration of the Russian economy after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Secondly, other factors like Russia's ill-calculated de-linking strategy, and the failure of the US to secure a strategically arbitrating link with Russia in Northeast Asia accounted to Russia's rapid decline in the region. More specifically, Russia's thoroughly pro-Korean policy, which largely derived from its pro-Western foreign policy orientation in the 1990s, concluded in Russia giving up on strategic cooperation with North Korea. This in turn deteriorated Russia's positional power in the Northeast Asian regional politics network after the de-linking of Russia-North Korea strategic cooperation. As a result, Russia did not have any alternative methods of countering American policies of Russian exclusion, which left Russia completely excluded from processes of discussing important regional security issues, like the first North Korean Nuclear Crisis (1993-94) and the 4-Party Talks. Russia's retreat from the Korean Peninsula became a key reason why Russia could not take any responsibility in major issue handling in Northeast Asia.¹²

The de-linking process at the regional level between the US and Russia signified that the two countries, despite discussing cooperation at a global level, could not establish a NE

¹² V. Zhirinovsky's Interview with the *Chosun Daily*.

regional cooperation network. In other words, through temporary operation of the North Korea-US link, the US focused on resolving the nuclearization of North Korea. Conclusively, the US failed to utilize the comprehensiveness network-based approach, which led to the failure of solving nuclearization of North Korea. Frankly, during this period of global strategy change, the US left the Russian interests alone because it lacked an appropriate policy to treat Russia in Northeast Asia.

Structural holes made from Russia's ill-fated de-linking policies with North Korea, along with the US' decision to exclude Russia became key elements of Northeast Asian regional political shift, which became an important structural reason behind halting Russia's global status from exerting influences at the regional level. Furthermore, one of the two strategic links of North Korea, the North Korea-China link, allowed China to take the role of an exclusive broker with North Korea, thereby allowing China's regional potential to be utilized at a much higher level than its actual hard power level. Such changes in Northeast Asia later acted as important structural reasons why Russia could not have relinquished the disparity between its global status with that of Northeast Asia.

3.3 2000s: Russia's Revitalization of Lost Links and Relative Decline of US Leadership in Northeast Asia

The 2000s was when the China-Russia strategic link was strengthened and the US leadership in aligning order in Northeast Asia showed its limits. Ever since President Putin took office, Russia's status in Northeast Asia has been strengthening relentlessly. This is a result of revitalizing links between China and partially with North Korea, instead of strengthening its own hard power.

First, Russia succeeded in regaining partial influence in Northeast Asian region through the policy of linking relation (its links of strategic cooperation) with China from the global level to a regional level. In reality, after 1996, two states put noticeable efforts in strengthening strategic cooperation, though because of China's passive attitude, no practical strategic cooperation was realized. However, from 2000 and on, both Washington and Beijing were determined to vitalize a comprehensive framework of good-neighborly cooperation to strengthen their strategic network. For instance, the launching of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) became an important factor in stabilizing the relations of the two countries.¹³ The Russia-China strategic link which was not operating in the 1990s became apparently strengthening in the 2000s, which in turn became a main challenge to the US in exerting its influence in Northeast Asia, and an important factor driving changes in the general structure of Northeast Asian regional politics.

Meanwhile, Russia recovered one of its biggest link lost with North Korea. This bold act showed Russia's ambition to reinvigorate its regional values as a country with friendly relations with both Koreas. Since his entrance to the Kremlin, Putin successfully signed a normalization treaty with North Korea, and made his first official overseas trip to North Korea in July 2000, the first country out of the ex-Soviet countries that he made his official appearance to. While this trip was merely a stop-over on his way to the G8 Summit Meeting held in Okinawa, Japan, Putin's appearance in North Korea signified a continuation of the personal friendship between Putin and Kim Jong-Il (Preobrazhensky, 2004). Putin later delivered the North Korean position on missile tests and others to the Western powers.

¹³ Military exercise in Central Asia, the Far East, Shandong Peninsula, etc.

As a result of such amity, Russia was able participate in the 6 Party Talks as an official member, thereby securing its status as a major player in Northeast Asia.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the mere existence of Russia-North Korea hospitality in this period is insufficient to conclude that the two were engaged in a strategic cooperation. While it remains true that Russia prompted many projects to interact with North Korea, the revolving debt issues, among many, retarded the process of developing the relationship into a strategic cooperation. The Second North Korean Nuclear Crisis did not have a positive impact on this either.

Around the same time, Russia showed efforts to link with not just North Korea in the Northeast Asian region, but also with others including China. Consequently, Russia successfully established a strategic partnership with South Korea. Although the Russia-South Korea relations was not at the level where it was sufficient to say that it inhabited all qualities of a strategic cooperation, it had many potentials to develop into a complete strategic cooperation, especially considering the unpredictable changes of situation in the Northeast Asian region. Russia showed a great deal of interest in promoting the entire region to move away from a China-dependent model of development to a trilateral development model with the two Koreas. Unfortunately, the Second North Korean Crisis left these efforts in vein.

It is important to see not only that the recovery of links with North Korea and China had a mountainous contribution to Russia's return to Northeast Asian regional politics, but also the enabling of conditions that allowed its return. One obvious factor is the US-China rivalry; the competition between the clashing superpowers created a small vacuous room for Russia to gain partially successful re-linking with the others.

In addition, Russia's recovery of its hard power at the global level and the rise of oil and gas prices brought great benefits to Russia. However, the underdevelopment of a reliable resource transportation network system infrastructure towards the East, unlike its well-established such network towards Europe remained as Russia's biggest task in regaining its status in the Northeast Asian region; needless to mention, Europe's dependency on Russian natural resources is Russia's main passage of exerting influence to Europe. The very lack of such infrastructure that connects Russia with Northeast Asia is a factor that retarded Russia's status recovery process. Thus, to overcome the challenge, during his second term, Putin considered that it was most crucial to develop and promote an eastward pipeline projects as shown in <Figure 2>. Nonetheless, this project was stalled for many reasons, including the China-Japan rivalry, as well as the continuation of North Korean nuclearization issue.

Limitation on Russia's efforts naturally led it to narrow down on the number of links and ultimately led it to switch the Northeast Asia strategy to strengthening the existing links. This strategic decision increased the probability of an appearance of a new northern triangular cooperative system.

3.4 2010s: Russia's Expansion of Efforts in the Midst of a G2 Era

Regional politics was reorganized in Northeast Asia upon the arrival of the post-financial crisis G2 era in the 2010s. To understand Russia's eastward policy, especially its Northeast

¹⁴ Russia's participation in the 6 Party Talks was made possible because of North Korea's aggressive request, despite the reluctance of South Korea and the US refusal. At the time, Kim Jong-Il requested Putin to organize the 6 Party Talks, however, Putin respectfully denied the request to organize, and instead, he took part in the Talks as a participant. (Japanese newspaper)

Asian policy, it may be necessary to examine the competitive nature of the China-Russia border regions, like the North Korean Rajin Port license issue.

In order to foster economic cooperation with North Korea, China proposed a 'land-route-port-area integration' project, a project that ultimately aims to connect Hunchun-Kwonha-Wonjung-Rajin by highway, and approach Rajin Port. Russia, which spent a great deal of effort to connect the Trans-Siberian Railroad with the North Korean railroad since the Kim Il-Sung era, actively promoted the discussion of the possibility of Rajin-Hassan railroad project with the North Koreans. This eventually led to Russia earning a development rights to Pier 3.

China endured the Russian competition to win North Korea and remained unstoppable. It announced plans for the Liaoning Sheng 'coastal economic belt plan,' and he Jilin 'Chang-Ji-Tu (Changchen-Jilin-Tumen) Development Plan' in July and August of 2009, respectively. In October 2009, China's Prime Minister, Won Jiabo brought a surprise gift to North Korea: a management right of Rajin Pier 1. In September 23, 2009, when Hu Jintao met with President Medvedev in New York during the G20 Summit Meeting, the two heads of state agreed to a 'Dongbei China and the Russian Far East and Siberia Development Cooperation 2009-2018,' which hushed the potential uprising of the Russian counterpart for winning the management right to Pier 1.

Furthermore, to realize the China-North Korea cooperation, China completed the construction of Changchun-Jilin-Yanji highway, as well as a high-speed train that can cover the entire Changchun to Yanji trip in less than 2.5 hours in 2013. North Korea was not the only country that China connected railroads and highways with. In fact, it began construction of a high speed railroad system that connects Chita (Russia)-Daqing-Harbin and the Russian Far East (Ko, 2011). China continued to rapidly expand its land-based infrastructures like the Harbin -Changchun-Dalian freeway, which can be connected to the Northern parts of North Korea or other rails that can offer Pyongyang access to the outside world (Choo, 2008). <Refer to Figures 3, 4>. Clearly, China's gigantic transportation infrastructure and network programs represents that China has successfully embarked on a journey to a true transnational economic cooperation organization, with realistic hopes to see tangible results by 2020s,¹⁵ making the present era more important to China than any other periods in history.

China's comprehensive, systematic and secretive economic cooperation program with North Korea is making other surrounding countries nervous, especially Russia. Some experts who support Russia's eastward policy criticize the current status quo as ineffective. Some even extends the criticism as far as an argument that Russia must expand the competitive edge in developing the Russian Far East to counter China's pro-active role in the region (Karaganov, 2011). In this sense, the August 2011 meeting between Medvedev and Kim Jong-Il clearly shows how anxious Russia is; at the time, the Russian side was so busy trying to counter China by expanding Russian influence with material resources, such as natural energy, electricity, food, etc. (Beom-Shik Shin, 2011). In addition, since November 2013, Russia has installed the Department of Far East Development, which deals with, among many things, Russia's North Korea cooperation programs. Specifically, Russia proposed a joint development of Pier 3 to South Korea in November 2013 during when the two heads of states met.¹⁶ This cooperation can be interpreted not only as Russia's commitment to Rajin

¹⁵ *ChoSun JoongAang TonShin* (June 10, 2011).

¹⁶ *Seoul ShinMun* (September 12, 2012); *Asia KyungJe* (November 23, 2012); *Yonhab News* (November 21, 2013).

with the South Koreans, but also the significance of checking China from its back yard.

North Korea seems very careful in maintaining a delicate balance in between China and Russia. This balancing game is speculated to continue for a while, especially considering that North Korea has much to gain from both countries in terms of fulfilling its national interests and reliance. For instance, North Korea fully trusts the Chinese with its Shinuiju development, whereas it risks competition between Russia and China for the Rajin development. It will be interesting to see how North Korea's "balance of dependency" (Woo, 2013) will affect the future of North Korea-China-Russia border cooperation.

China continued to grow even in the midst of the global financial crisis, and Russia accelerated its momentum to seek chance to seek a new Northeast Asia strategy. In the current time period, Russia has several strategic choices in the region, such as continuing its strategy to free-ride on China, or to strengthen its position as a broker/mediator in the region by recovering links of strategic cooperation with the US, or to establish new links and channels of influences in the region. Currently, there is no clue that suggests whether Russia has chosen any of the above strategic options. Nonetheless, it is most likely that Russia will consider the possibilities of all three options and make a final decision later. Certainly, there is the possibility of Russia expanding its dependency on China after the addition of Crimea to its territory, however, there is no guarantee that global politics and the regional politics will calibrate in response to the other.

Needless to say, Russia will choose a strategy which will benefit it the greatest. Russia has learned from past experiences of de-linking and exclusion politics that it is inevitable to push for strategies and policies that will fill in the structural holes. Hence, in the 2010s, Russia is more aggressive than ever before, attempting to strengthen its network strategy to enter the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁷

There are important implications to Russia's aggressiveness. First, should Russia choose the option of establishing new links and channels of influence in the region, it could potentially bring remarkable changes to an important structural hole in Northeast Asia regional politics of inter-Korean relations. That is, if Russia supplements the reasons for the two failures in the last two decades, it may just arrange a chance for a new change. To overcome the limits put on from delinking with North Korea, and excluding links with the US, Russia has tried to enhance strategic links with China and recover links with North Korea (Toloraya, 2012). Also, to strengthen its independent influence, it is attempting to push forward with the energy transportation infrastructure project. For instance, the Russia-North-South Korea gas pipeline project must undergo a full-scale review under the premises of excavating new potentials. Furthermore, Russia is currently trying to strengthen its alienated and underdeveloped area in the Far East as an area of cooperation with China's Northeast region and the Korean Peninsula. In such context, it is worthwhile to examine Russia's plans for developing Vladivostok as a centerpiece of the Russian Far East development, trade, transportation, logistics and energy market. This kind of Russia's policy may have a significant effect on the structure of Northeast Asia regional politics.

If Russia succeeds in strengthening its eastward policies and translating its links toward Northeast Asia, it may mutate the pivot of the US-China relations to a more of a strategic US-China-Russia triangularity. Moreover, in order to enhance Russia's status in regional politics, it is planning to intensify regional cooperation network through translation of strategic links and developing its Far East. These two strategies lay in the center of policies

¹⁷ "Why Russia is Bolstering Ties with North Korea," *The Guardian* (June 4, 2014).

to transform the Russian state identity from a Eurasian state to a Euro-Pacific state. Frankly, Russia as an energy ultra-super power had extremely weak influence on the Asia-Pacific due to the lack of energy/resource transportation system. This is truer in a sense that the Chinese has already began to monopolize the Russian resource market. However, if Russia can install a sustainable and reliable energy transportation infrastructure, and successfully develop the Russian Far East to incorporate the infrastructure system as an important piece of Northeast Asian economy, it may as well gain a window of opportunity to restructure its position in the Northeast Asian regional politics.

Clearly, the 2010s is characterized by Russia's aggressive eastward policy, which is translated to a potential for Russia and China to escape from the conventional complete-interdependent relationship to a two-fold structure in which competition and cooperation can coexist. Recently, especially, North Korea factor seems more likely to become a variable in exacerbating the limits of the China-Russia strategic cooperation. The probability of the North Korea-China relations colliding with the North Korea-Russia relations can inflate if North Korea utilizes the Russia-China competition and if Russia realizes its intents to recover the lost influence over the Korean Peninsula. Also, if North Korea – which already feels that its support from the China is insufficient - reaches out to Russia for military assistance in forms of weapons technology or supplies, the entire region may experience a rise of tension between China and Russia.

Conjointly, it is very likely that tensions over economic and developmental strategy may become exceedingly aggressive. There are many clues that lead to such speculation. For instance, China has already begun to spearhead its Northeast development plans and has been actively pushing forward its economic developments linked to special economic zones like the Rajin-Seonbong, and the Wihwado-Hwanggeumbyeong projects. Such tendencies of China and its development projects will most likely retard Russia's Far East development and increase frustration and alienation of the people in the area. Currently, although imbalanced and highly burdensome to China, the economic relation between China and North Korea seems inseparable. But in the future if the Russia-North Korea economic cooperation in various fields such as energy, agriculture, logistics, and trade vitalizes, a significant portion of the China-North Korea economic cooperation may be replaced. This in turn may reduce China's influence over North Korean security and politics.

Overall, the significance for China-Russia cooperation is still valid, but the last 20 years of positional changes of the two countries shifted each other's level and direction of strategic cooperation aimed at the US. As China continues to walk down the path of becoming an ultra-super power, the US-China-Russia triangularity is changing. And depending on the matter, the triangularity may face a change in its structure to a situation where the US and Russia may team up to counter China's hegemonic diplomatic expansion.

There is still more work to be completed. It is not wholeheartedly up to the will of Russia to determine the recovery of strategic cooperation with the US at the regional politics level. Whether the strategic cooperation between the US and Russia as a regional axis will recover or not is increasingly becoming an important variable in determining the future changes of the Northeast Asian regional politics. Therefore, the most significant point in order for the Russian strategy to function is the recovery of the US-Russia cooperation. It is likely to bring positive results if the US gives up its exclusion policies on Russia from the 90s and intentionally and willingly support Russia's linking with Northeast Asia and pilot Russia's constructive diplomacy in Northeast Asia.

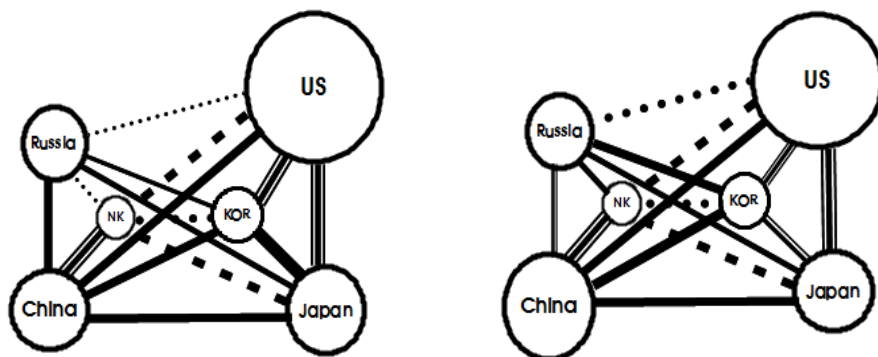
4. TRIANGULARITIES IN THE STRUCTURE OF NORTHEAST ASIAN POWER NETWORK

The discussion so far was centered on the situation of regional politics of Northeast Asia through the lens of Russian strategies. From this point onwards, how can one understand the dynamics of strategic triangularity within regional politics? <Figure 2> is a visualization of Northeast Asian states' network of power in the 1990s and 2000s. The relationships between each actors are marked as links, on the basis of strategic cooperation, current diplomatic relations, economic interactions, etc.

The most powerful link found in Northeast Asia is an alliance between the US-Japan, US-ROK, China-DPRK. Strategic cooperation relations just as powerful are the links between the ROK-Japan and China-Russia. Interestingly, South Korea was able to establish a strategic cooperation partnership with China and Russia on a bilateral basis. Through such relations, these countries have already mutually acknowledged the necessity of strategic cooperation, though strategic interactions and coordination of strategies have yet to develop (Shin, 2010).

Although this kind of classification of strategic interactions is not easy to establish, the most crucial relationship in determining the future of this region's order is the US-China relations. Both states have keenly formed a dual relationship of cooperation and competition

Figure 2. Power Network of Northeast Asia in 1990s / Power Network of Northeast Asia in 2000s



alliance	strategic cooperation	friendly relations	selective cooperation / competition	conflict / antagonism
intensifying·maintaining =====	high level =====	strong rel. ████████	selective minimum ●●●●●●	conflict ■■■■■■■
adjusting =====	middle level =====	mediate rel. ████████	low competition ●●●●	middle antagonism ■■■■■
		weak rel. ████████	high competition ●●●●	strong antagonism ■■■■■

not only at the global but also at the regional level. At the global level, Chinese influence is inadequate to leap over that of the US, which has already cultivated a dominion of global governance that exists still.

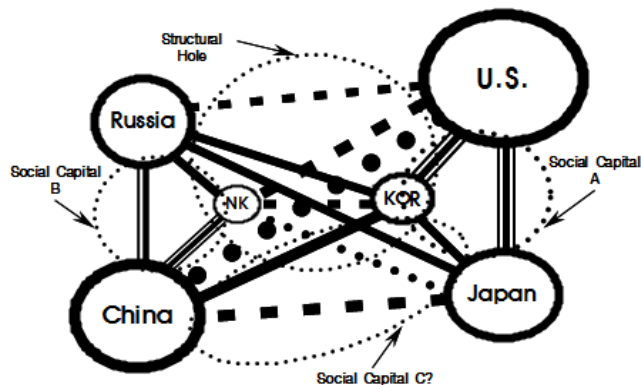
Thus, it is true that it is inevitable for China to cooperate with the US in some areas to a certain extent. Nonetheless, in Northeast Asia, China's influences are at a considerable level that already rivals the US. A series of events that came after the observation that a G2 Era has come after the global financial crisis, such as the Tibet Incident, Dalai Lama's visit to the US, the Sinking of Cheonan, the US Naval presence in the West Sea, Lu Xiaobo's Nobel Prize, China's human rights issue, the Google issue within China, military tensions, et cetera are only some of the events that clearly show the existence of competition between the two countries. Both states are trying their best to monitor and manage the competition through strategic adjustment, but because of the instability of the relations, there is a good chance that the situation will turn to frustration soon. The Senkaku Islands issue of 2012 only seems to aggravate the matter worse. Therefore, it is clear that the US and China has to strategically and mutually interact with each other. But, the sheer fact of coexistence of cooperation and competition remains as a double-edged sword.

There are four meaningful points in observing the current status of Northeast Asian power structure and its future. Explaining these four points via the concept of 'social capital' and 'structural hole' comes in very handy at this point.

In relation to social capital and structural hole, point of earlier interest in the Northeast Asian power structure is the triangularity among ROK-US-Japan. Titled "Social Capital A" in <Figure 3>, this relationship portrays a social capital in which the US-ROK and the US-Japan alliance links and the ROK-Japan's strong cooperation are combined. The US uses this social capital to check on China and as a vessel of exerting American influence in the region.

In <Figure 3>, a countering triangularity among North Korea-China-Russia, or "Social Capital B" is shown (Chung, 2011). Needless to say, a brotherhood-like relationship between North Korea and China was once again reaffirmed through a series of events in 2000s, and it is also not possible to deny the historically unparalleled strategic partnership between China and Russia. Nonetheless, the contents of the China-Russia strategic cooperation are highly dependent on the level and the region where the cooperation takes place. Specifically

Figure 3. Power Network of Northeast Asia by the year of 2015



speaking, in Northeast Asia, Russia is beginning to step aside from the policies that were half-step behind China to a degree that is not only enhancing its own individuality, but also drawing lines between relationships (Karaganov, 2011). This change is becoming more apparent in the Russia-North Korea relations. For instance, Russia experienced a quick influence loss at the global level after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it was harshest for Russia in Northeast Asia. As mentioned earlier, one of the biggest reasons for this is because Russia voluntarily chose a delinking policy towards North Korea, which eventually brought sharp decline of Russian presence in the Korean Peninsula, ultimately leading to Russia's general decline in the region (Meyer, 1999; Ziegler, 1994). As a result, Russia was excluded from the 4-Party Talks. Despite Russia's noteworthy efforts to revitalize the lost link with North Korea, the weakness of the bilateral ties ultimately led to an immature form of North Korea-China-Russia triangularity, which has not yet evolved into a powerful social capital to stand against ROK-US-Japan triangularity.

However, as mentioned earlier, there has been an indication of change that deserves spotlight. It seems that through the August 2011 North Korea-Russia summit meeting, signs of strategic cooperation between the two has begun to visualize. Key issues, which showed to have improved, are the North Korean national debt problem, economic cooperation, security cooperation, Russia-Inter-Korean gas pipe project, Russia-North Korea electric grid connection, Trans-Korean Railroad-Trans Siberian Railroad connection projects, etc. Therefore, it may be wise to understand the Russia-North Korea link as a link that will soon transform into a strategic one. But even if such relationship is enhanced, the triangularity among North Korea-China-Russia is unlikely to structuralize into a complete and strong social capital. Again, this is because there is a clear distinction between the direction of Korean Peninsula policies of Russia and China, and it is likely that North Korea will want to utilize its mediator position in between the two powers to achieve its strategic goal of "balance of dependence."

Meanwhile, the ROK-China-Japan triangularity shown in <Figure 3> has ample potential to develop into a full social capital. Specifically, China has a big interest in a trilateral cooperation in forms of ASEAN+3 (APT) or ROK-China-Japan summit meeting without the US (Yang, 2010). Despite its potentials, there is still a long way before it takes on the role of social capital due to the restructuring of the US-Japan relations, a plan that Hatoyama and Ozawa argued for. It is rather likely that the decline of East Asia Community strategy, and the recent heightening of tension over the Senkaku/Diawidao Islands between Japan and China will only enhance US-Japan inclination. Furthermore, incidents like the sinking of Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island strengthened Korean people's belief in China's nepotism of North Korea and distaste in seeking trustworthy long-term partnership with China.

The formation of structural hole surrounding North Korea is what one ought to look at most carefully. The inter-Korean relation is definitely the clearest structural hole on the Northeast Asian power dynamics, not to mention the absence of North Korea-US, and the North Korea-Japan relations. Therefore, depending on how this structural hole is filled, the Northeast Asian power dynamics will experience a significant change.

Other points of interests from the purview of structural hole are the North Korea-Russia link and the US-Russia link. As mentioned above, ultimately, Russia's sharp decline in Northeast Asia region in the 90s has its roots not only in the decline of Russia's hard power and its wrong de-link policies at a strategic level, but also on the US policies of deterring Russia and the consequential link loss as well as the failure to establish an alternative

regional link. This signifies that despite discussing cooperation at the global level, the US and Russia during the post-Cold War period could not establish a Northeast regional level cooperation network. Consequently, through temporary operation of North Korea-US link, the US focused on resolving the nuclearization of North Korea. Conclusively, the US failed to utilize the comprehensive network theory-based approach, which eventually led to the failure of solving the nuclearization of North Korea. Frankly, during this period of global strategy change, the US largely ignored the Russia's interests because it lacked policies to treat Russia in Northeast Asia as a major actor.

The formation of a structural hole as a result of de-link that disabled Russia-North Korea, Russia-US strategic interactions, still function as an important factor that hinders the establishment of cooperative order in Northeast Asian regional politics. In that sense, the analysis thus far showed that it is necessary to focus on filling in the structural holes to complete the task of fostering Northeast Asian regional political stabilization.

5. CONCLUSION

The Obama Administration has announced a new Asia policy, otherwise known "America's return to Asia," or "Pivoting Asia." The recent announcement by Ashton Carter, the current Deputy Secretary of Defense, shows that the US considers its goal to return to Asia as a re-balancing strategy. Nonetheless, this kind of security-centered approach has its limits in piloting cooperation from Asian nations, especially now, when China's General Secretary Xi Jinping is discussing the Chinese dream and pushing forth a new type of great power relations.

It is inevitable for South Korea to face hardship in choosing between strategies of the US-centered security reliance and China-centered economic reliance. Therefore, the US should offer a comprehensive strategic vision for the region that not only considers security, but also economic relations as well. Such strategy should not refrain from ignoring China's strategies, rather it should offer solutions to building order and architecture of Asia as a region for cooperation. The US versus China rivalry over taking leadership in RCEP or TPP kind of economic cooperation regime is no longer a viable option.

For a successful Northeast Asian regional cooperation, an understanding of when and how a grassroots/down-to-top approach from the border areas connect with actual cooperation policies of each state. Therefore, it is necessary to keep a close eye on multiple micro-regional cooperation and other efforts for region formation in Northeast Asia, especially the North Korea-China-Russia border region cooperation. The Northeast Asian transnational cooperation will connect with various interests of neighboring states and will experience a profound effect on Northeast Asia as a whole, which has a high chance of affecting the foundational axis of Northeast Asian regional order.

Apropos of the above discussion, there are three possible scenarios:

The first scenario concerns a China-led regional cooperation mechanism based on China's successful eastern region development plan. This scenario takes into consideration, a heightened influence of China in Northeast Asia, which could damage the American side's Asia policies. Some scholars even argue that as soon as the Chinese central government got involved in this business, it is a matter of time that this scenario will materialize. China's role in the North Korea-China-Russia triangular cooperation is expanding and what seemed to have been a balance is no longer a balance, rather a China-led model.

China already has secured the license to use Rajin Port Pier 1, and if it can get its hands on the newly developing Piers 5 and 6, China will no doubt be the sole superpower to strengthen its power in the West (Dandong-Sinuiju) as well as the northeastern corridor (Hunchun-Rason). For Russia, it has no choice but to allow China to take such leadership and it must alter its own Korean Peninsula policies to resemble more of a band-wagoning policy than anything. Consequently, a China-led model of the Northeast Asian economy will eventually grow on top of a massive Chinese funds and contribute to the longevity of China's global status as a superpower. The significance of the ROK-US-Japan economic cooperation would face relative drawbacks in the region, which will also allow China to exert dominancy in Northeast Asia.

This is not limited to economy. It also suggests that the Korean Peninsula can easily be connected to the strengthening of China's geopolitical influence in the region. For instance, it is worth noting that the economic and militaristic hospitality between China and North Korea in 2011. China's acquisition of the access to East Sea is significant not only because of economic potentials, but also because of the militaristic potentials. Once China's navy expands into East Sea, new security circumstances may occur in the region, especially concerning the US, Russia, and South Korea. One Chinese expert stated that Rajin Port is an economic port in nature; nevertheless, it has great potentials to be turned into a military base if necessary.

Therefore, a rigid social capital, which will be created as a result of China's leadership in the North Korea-China-Russia micro-regional cooperation, can possibly challenge the ROK-US-Japan triangularity and limit its role.

The second scenario involves a case in which Russia successfully acquires and maintains its leverage against China by the helps of Japan, and other on a case-by-case basis, which would lead to a balanced North Korea-China-Russia triangularity. It is very likely that if Russia can realize its potentials on energy, agriculture, and textiles, it can compete on par even against China.

There are some obstacles for Russia to overcome to envision such hopes; Russia's will and its economic ability are especially critical. It is true that Russia is dependent on Korea and it remains optimistic on the idea of the ROK-North Korea-Russia triangularity. South Korea, with Park Geun-hye Administration showing amity towards cooperating with Russia, there is still some possibility of micro-regional cooperation in Northeast Asia. Furthermore, under this scenario, North Korea can contribute to Russia's active participation. Ultimately, this scenario sees that Russia may benefit from other states' strategic goal of "balance of dependence."

Russia's active role can bring a balance of powers between Russia and China, especially around the border areas. This flexible interaction between cooperation and competition will allow other neighboring states to contribute to cooperation, which can potentially transform into a useful social capital. Moreover, by transforming Russia into a 'safety net' that alleviates the US-China tension, Russia can strengthen its status as a strategic player in Northeast Asia.

The third scenario draws Russia cooperation with Japan and the US in promotion of the Far East and Vladivostok development, thereby bringing the Northeast Asian micro-regional development axis closer to Russia geopolitically. In this case, China's contribution in the micro-regional development would be limited and it will be hard to spot China's active participation in regional politics. Should this scenario materializes, then the North Korea-China-Russia triangularity will not function as a social capital, and the American influence

over the Korean Peninsula may be kept under agreement with Russia.

In order for this scenario to be realized, it is necessary that the North Korea-US relations improve. Structural hole forming around North Korea is by far the most important point of interest in Northeast Asian power networks. The North Korea-US relations, the North Korea-Japan relations, and the inter-Korean relations are three obvious structural holes in the network. Therefore, depending on how these structural holes are filled, the Northeast Asian power structure will experience a significant degree of change.

Moreover, in relation to these structural holes, there is a need to reevaluate the significance of the US-Russia link along with the North Korea-Russia link. Needless to say, Russia's rapid loss of status in Northeast Asia during the 1990s happened as a result of diminishing Russian hard-power, its de-linking process, the loss of the US-Russia strategic relations, and the absence of alternative relations with other neighboring countries. This signifies that in the post-Cold War period, the US and Russia discussed cooperation only at the global level, but failed to form a cooperative mechanism in a Northeast Asia regional level. The US focused on temporary operation of the North Korea-US link in an attempt to solve the first North Korea nuclear crisis, which unfortunately turned out to be a failure. In fact, during this time, the US neglected Russian national interest without any alternative methods of dealing with Russia. Structural holes created as a consequence of the Russia-North Korea, and the Russia-US de-linking is still a retarding factor – an obstacle to overcome in promotion of cooperation in Northeast Asia. Therefore, the US must regard to consider communicating with Russia strategically at the regional level to seek new potentials.

How can Russia's new eastward policy be beneficial, or even become an asset to the US? While it is certain that the recent fiasco in Crimea put limits on how flexible the US can be, a theoretical discussion of the US' options can provide useful insights as to diagnosing exactly how much flexibility it has in interaction with Russia.

Firstly, the US can simply disregard Russia. By neglecting to address Russia, the US-China based bipolar order will form in East Asia. If this is the option that the US chooses, it must endure further tension with Russia, which will most definitely attempt to strengthen a rivaling cooperative partnership with China and North Korea. A China-Russia-North Korea coalition will bring more hardship to the US policy on Asia.

Secondly, the US can partially consider strategic cooperation with Russia. By searching for regional cooperation through participating and supporting the Russian economic projects, the US will allow Russia to successfully rise as a leading regional power in establishment of a tri-polar order in the region. Should the US choose this option, a noticeable degree of sensible stability will prevail in the region and ultimately, the regional politics may be directed towards establishing a balance of powers, which stems from the regional concert system. In between the US and Russia, it seems more rational and useful to enhance the security through economic cooperation, rather than the security cooperation.

Thirdly, the US can consider a comprehensive strategic cooperation. If the US is indeed in need of an all-inclusive direct strategic cooperation Russia at the regional level, then this option allows for a US-Russia partnership to contain China. Although this option seems logical for the US to choose in case where China tries to oust American influence from the region, the possibility of the US choosing this option is rather low.

In conclusion, there is a need to see and understand the US-Russia relations as an asset not only for the US to counter China's rise, but also to form a stable and co-prospering regional political development. It can open many doors for American foreign policies. That is, a sort of a semi-triangularity among the US-China-Russia seems more beneficial for

regional stability and cooperation. Therefore, the works of the US utilizing Russia without excluding China, and establishment of a vision for a regional order in the context of fostering stability and cooperation will become an utmost important factor in developing peace and co-prosperity in Northeast Asia. As a supplementary measure, a wide variety of other strategic trilateral discussions must be considered.

The Russia experts in the US tend to show their deeply rooted distrust in Russia, a clear legacy of the Cold War. Such distrust has led the US to maintain its Cold-War like tendencies to simply ignore the possibility of regional cooperation with Russia, but they must overcome this distrust and seek to employ a cooperative relations with Russia. The current time in history is a critical juncture, a time of new leadership and a finest moment to prepare to finally leap the legacies of the 20th century international relations through the discussions of specific details of change.

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