

Introduction
**East Asia in 2015—An Increasingly
Severe Strategic Environment**

Proliferation of Islamic Extremists Posing a Threat to East Asia

The international community today faces the threat of the proliferation of Islamic extremists represented in particular by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). As long as the Iraqi Army on the ground is unable to build its capabilities and there are no strong partners available inside Syria, it will be difficult to defeat ISIL only through air strikes by a US-led coalition of the willing. In order to undermine ISIL, it will be necessary to eliminate the root causes of its rise by ending the Syrian Civil War and the conflict between religious sects in Iraq. Since there are no signs of any end to the sectarian conflict in Iraq or the civil war in Syria, the situation on the ground remains favorable to the survival of ISIL. Against this background, the Russian armed forces started bombing in Syria on September 30, 2015. While calling upon Western powers to form a coalition against ISIL, Russia aimed to rebuild its strategic position, which had deteriorated as a result of the Ukraine crisis. Russia's intervention in Syria is its first full-scale overseas military deployment since the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan thirty-six years ago.

East Asia also faces the threat of ISIL. Japan and other East Asian countries have been victims of terrorism by ISIL, such as attacks on citizens who had traveled to the Middle East and on diplomatic missions abroad. Furthermore, nationals of China and other East Asian countries have joined ISIL as foreign fighters. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China is included in ISIL's "territory" in a map of its future domains posted online in 2014. These ambitions of ISIL may become a threat for China in the future, but for the time being China takes the position of not intervening in the fight against ISIL.

North Korea's Attempts to Upgrade Its Nuclear and Missile Capabilities

On January 6, 2016, North Korea announced that it had succeeded in testing a hydrogen bomb, and on February 7, it said that it had launched a ballistic missile, professing it to be a "satellite." Those moves demonstrate that the country is strengthening its position of aiming to improve its nuclear and missile capabilities. While much remains uncertain about its capacity of loading nuclear warheads onto its missiles, it is possible that North Korea has already reached the stage of

realizing the miniaturization of nuclear weapons and the ability to put them on warheads. In light of that, if North Korea improves its submarine technology and sea-launch capabilities, and in the future deploys a submarine-launched ballistic missile system capable of loading nuclear warheads, while at the same time upgrading the capacity of its land-based mobile missile-launching systems, there is the danger that its nuclear survivability would increase markedly. Amidst chronic financial difficulties and fuel shortages, among other problems, it is likely that North Korea will continue to upgrade its nuclear and missile capabilities based on the strategic line of carrying out economic construction and building nuclear armed forces simultaneously. As for conventional military power, meanwhile, it will pour energy into reinforcing its military power, primarily the improvement of asymmetric war-fighting capabilities such as special operations capabilities. As for domestic politics in North Korea, the so-called “unitary leadership system” of the Workers’ Party of Korea will be firmly maintained, though in fact, a reign of terror through purges and the dictatorship of Kim Jong Un, first chairman of the National Defense Commission, are being steadily reinforced.

No improvement has been seen in North Korea’s relations with major countries, so the country is finding itself increasingly isolated in the international community. It has repeatedly made hardline statements diplomatically, aiming to reinforce its deterrent power against the United States through nuclear weapons and missiles, using that as a diplomatic card while firmly maintaining its basic policy of trying to stop what it describes as the “hostile policy” of the United States toward itself. As far as its relations with South Korea are concerned, moves had been made toward a gradual, limited contact, with some flexibility seen in its hardline stance, but after the announcement of the success of the hydrogen bomb test, North-South relations have once again turned for the worse. South Korea is working toward deterring various threats from North Korea based on its alliance with the United States, while also aiming to reinforce its own strike and defense means, developing ballistic missiles and others, in order to respond to the enhancement of North Korea’s nuclear and missile capabilities.

The South China Sea and China’s Strategy for Expanding Its Reach Overseas

China’s strategy toward the outside world has been gradually taking on a harder,

sterner aspect, albeit with some variations along the way. In addition to its land reclamation operations in the South China Sea and its continuation of pressure on Japan by placing Chinese Maritime Police vessels in the area of the Senkaku Islands, China has also sought to expand the economic sphere under its influence through means such as establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and promotion of its “One Belt, One Road” proposal. It also held a military parade to mark the 70th anniversary of China’s victory over Japan and publicized at home and abroad the modernization of its People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Its strategic military policies are laid out in *China’s Military Strategy*, its first military white paper in two years, which conspicuously presented its current military strategy of an active strategic defense policy along with the PLA Navy’s policy for fusion of defense of littoral waters and protection on the high seas. On December 31, 2015, China announced a major reform policy for the PLA, and it is expected that the reforms will give Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Communist Party of China (as well as president of China’s government and chairman of its Central Military Commission) even greater control over the military.

In the South China Sea, China has launched unilateral and large-scale attempts to change the status quo. In reaction, in October the US Navy carried out a “freedom of navigation” operation by sailing an Aegis missile destroyer within twelve nautical miles of Subi Reef, and both Japan and Australia have expressed their “grave concerns” toward China’s positions. In these and other ways, the United States and its allies have been successfully shoulder to shoulder in sending out the message of a threat to order in the region posed by China’s emerging stance. At the same time, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has experienced a combination of external and internal influences, i.e., the growing involvement of the United States in the region and the simultaneous conflict of positions among its members, which has shaken ASEAN’s significance as an effective political body in dealing with South China Sea issues.

Obama Administration’s China Policy Facing Difficulties

While the Barack Obama administration is pressed to deal with the highly tense situation that continues in Ukraine, Afghanistan, and Syria, it is still maintaining its policy of advancing the rebalance to the Asia-Pacific and is making ongoing efforts to achieve this. Developments such as the Russia’s increasingly assertive

stance in Ukraine and Syria, and moreover, the growing power of ISIL in the Middle East, could compel changes to the strategy set forth in the *2014 Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR).

US policy toward China has two key challenges to meet: to encourage China to play an active role in solving international issues while observing international rules and norms, and to deter China from taking actions that go against the interests of the United States. The Obama administration should not face any major problems in achieving these goals in cooperative areas such as stable growth of the global economy, measures to address climate change, and nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction. But in competitive and confrontational areas such as the launch of cyber attacks on US companies to steal sensitive information and China's actions in the South China Sea, the Obama administration is facing difficulties in deciding how to solve these issues and what approach it should take in its policy to China.

Japan's Security Policy Faces the Need for a New Response

The year 2015 was a historic year in the development of Japan's security policy. In January 2015, amid increasing attention to space as well as cyberspace as a new security issue, Japan formulated the new Basic Plan on Space Policy, positioning space security as an important issue. On April 27, the Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation were updated for the first time in eighteen years since 1997. The new Guidelines increased the reliability of extended deterrence and enhanced coordination between the US-Japan Alliance and US-Republic of Korea Alliance. Strengthening deterrence against the threat from North Korea, including nuclear weapons and missiles, thus became an important issue for the three allies not only along two "lines" but also across the whole "plane" of their alliance arrangements.

The legislation for peace and security passed by the Diet on September 19 is considered to contribute to the realization of two objectives: the enhancement of the national security of Japan, including gray zone situations, and the strengthening of cooperation with the international community to ensure international peace and stability. To these ends, ten laws, including the Self-Defense Forces Act, were amended and a new law, the International Peace Support Act, which has been described as a permanent or general law regarding international peace cooperation,

was enacted. This new legislation was established on the basis of a Cabinet decision of July 1, 2014 recognizing the limited exercise of the right of collective self-defense by taking a form that is logically consistent with the interpretation of the Constitution to date. Amid the increasingly severe security environment surrounding Japan, it is viewed as legislative development for the purpose of substantially upgrading the means for pursuing the peace and security of the Japanese people.

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