



# Asia-Pacific Perspectives on the Ukraine Crisis

BY BRAHMA CHELLANEY, ALEXANDER CHIEH-CHENG HUANG, TETSUO KOTANI, SEONG-HYON LEE, AND RORY MEDCALF

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**T**he ongoing crisis in Ukraine has reverberated throughout the global strategic landscape, including in the Asia-Pacific. Have Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and the subsequent U.S. response caused countries in Asia to question the reliability of U.S. security guarantees and wonder whether U.S. rebalancing towards Asia can be sustained? Or are the dynamics in Asia and Europe vastly different, since U.S. commitments, interests, and influence in Asia are more substantial than what currently exists in Ukraine?

In this roundtable, thought leaders and policy experts from key Asia-Pacific states comment on the crisis in Ukraine and the U.S. response to it. Contributing experts include Rory Medcalf (Lowy Institute for International Policy), Brahma Chellaney (Centre for Policy Research), Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang (Tamkang University), Tetsuo Kotani (Japan Institute of International Affairs), and Seong-hyon Lee (Stanford University).

## Crimea: A Silver Lining for the United States' Asian Allies?

Rory Medcalf

## Japan's "Proactive Contribution to Peace" and the Annexation of Crimea

Tetsuo Kotani

## India Risks Losing Out in a "Contest of Ideas"

Brahma Chellaney

## The Korean Angle on Crimean Fallout: America's Perception Gap

Seong-hyon Lee

## Taiwan Is No Crimea, But...

Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang



## About the Authors

### Brahma Chellaney

Brahma Chellaney is Professor of Strategic Studies at the independent Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi.

### Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang

Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang is a Professor at Tamkang University and Chairman of the Council on Strategic and Wargaming Studies in Taiwan.

### Tetsuo Kotani

Tetsuo Kotani is a Senior Research Fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs.

### Seong-hyon Lee

Seong-hyon Lee is the 2013–14 Pantech Fellow in Korean Studies at Stanford University's Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center.

### Rory Medcalf

Rory Medcalf is Director of the International Security Program at the Lowy Institute and a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution.

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THE NATIONAL BUREAU *of* ASIAN RESEARCH

1414 NE 42ND STREET, SUITE 300  
SEATTLE, WA 98105 • 206-632-7370

1301 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE NW, SUITE 305  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20004 • 202-347-9767

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# Crimea: A Silver Lining for the United States' Asian Allies?

Rory Medcalf

What does the 2014 Ukraine crisis mean for geopolitics and strategic risks in Asia? It is tempting to leap to doom-laden conclusions that Russia's assault on Ukrainian sovereignty will spur China to show equal disregard for the independence of its neighbors, ushering in new risks of confrontation and conflict. According to this argument, China is emboldened and frontline U.S. allies like Japan and the Philippines are dismayed by Russia's blatant disregard for U.S. warnings against intervention in Ukraine. Even allies at distance from China, such as Australia, might quietly be wondering about long-term U.S. resolve, according to this logic. But all this overlooks the fundamental point that Ukraine—like Georgia before it in 2008—is not a U.S. ally. If anything, the value of alliances has been reaffirmed by recent events in Europe.

That would change, of course, were the United States to fail to support a NATO ally, such as a Baltic state, against Russian intimidation, but there is nothing to suggest that will occur; indeed, Putin has given NATO an enormous and self-defeating relevance boost. Moreover, after having its bluff called over real or perceived diplomatic red lines in Syria and Ukraine, Washington may be even more determined to hold the line if an ally or a core principle such as freedom of navigation is coercively confronted in Asia.

The ultimate lessons Asia and the rest of the world draw from the Ukraine situation will depend very much on what happens next. With President Obama due to visit Asia in April and ominous rumblings occurring again on the Korean Peninsula, now is the time for the United States to signal that its “rebalance”

to the Asia-Pacific is real and enduring—regardless of how bad the situation with Russia becomes.

A second troubling interpretation of what Crimea means for Asia is that it will lead to the dissipation or trifurcation of the United States' strategic attention. Washington's much-touted rebalance was already facing skepticism among Indo-Pacific allies and partners, who have seen modest and uneven follow-through to grand pronouncements like President Obama's November 2011 speech in Canberra, in which the “pivot” was emphatically proclaimed. The U.S. foreign and defense policy establishment now faces challenges on three fronts at once: Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia.

East Asian tensions remain serious. Differences between China and Japan over disputed islands and history carry the small but real possibility of war and certainly the likelihood of prolonged confrontation between Asia's two wealthiest powers. The chance of conflict or crisis in the South China Sea has likewise not diminished, as demonstrated by China's recent attempts to blockade the Philippines' resupply of an outpost in disputed waters. And North Korea remains a wildcard, as the recent exchange of artillery fire with South Korea reminds us.

Is the United States willing to show leadership in managing simultaneous crises across Asia, the Middle East, and Europe? How will allies in one region read Washington's handling, or perceived mishandling, of troubles in another? Will they have doubts about U.S. reliability and begin looking either to their own defenses or to make concessions to coercion?

Is it fanciful fearmongering to start thinking of the prospect of a future double Cold War, with U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China relations in the freezer at the same time? All these questions are being raised at a time when most Americans are weary of overseas entanglement and want foreign policy—and every other kind of policy—to begin at home.

Again, the answers to these questions may not be as grim as those observers who are fixated on the relative decline of the United States would assume. Putin's affront to Ukraine and the sanctity of international agreements has been a rude wake-up call to Western Europe in its postmodern slumber. But it has been an alarm bell for the United States too. Russia's actions serve as a reminder about how great powers behave and about what calculated risks a rival is willing to run when it sees its interests ill-served by a status quo that other powerful states are not determined to uphold.

In that sense, perhaps the Crimea crisis will make the United States more serious—not less—about stability, presence, and deterrence in Asia. And while there may be calls for Washington to sustain or even enhance its military presence in Europe, any outcome that slows or limits cuts to major U.S. defense programs will have collateral benefits for U.S. capabilities globally and thus in Asia.

The lessons that China may draw from the crisis also need to be considered. From Taiwan to the South and East China seas to the China-India border, there are no neat analogies to Crimea in Asia. It would also be simplistic to assume that the leadership in Beijing is rejoicing that its strategic partner Russia has poked a stick in Washington's eye and gotten away with it. Admittedly, there may be some renewed emphasis on the China-Russia strategic relationship, which was already receiving a boost through renewed Russian arms sales after a lull of some years. But China and Russia are partners of convenience, not allies, and their relationship is complicated by long-term currents of mistrust, including over Russia's far eastern territories.

For a short time, China may draw some comfort from the fact that U.S. attention has been distracted

from the maritime disputes on China's eastern edge. But Russia has now blatantly breached a bedrock principle of China's declared foreign policy: noninterference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. It may now be harder for Beijing to deflect international attention away from Tibet and Xinjiang, since one of the purposes of its non-interference policy has been to provide a moral and legal justification for opposing foreign scrutiny of and interference in those troubled provinces.

Yet China's support for some kind of international mediation or monitoring of the Ukraine situation or reiteration of its earlier call for "respect for international law" would present its own challenges for Beijing. Such a position would raise awkward questions, for example, about its present rejection of an attempt by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea to resolve China's maritime dispute with the Philippines. No wonder China has had to go through excruciating diplomatic gymnastics to maintain what it has called its "objective, just, fair, and peaceful" propaganda line of neither condemning nor endorsing Russia's annexation of Crimea.

On the eve of President Obama's Asia visit, the United States' Asian allies should strive to ensure they have his sustained strategic attention. But they should be more concerned by U.S. domestic challenges and the more general woes of the Obama administration—which have hampered effective strategic policy—than by the fear that the Crimean drama will mark the end of rebalancing. If Putin has stirred the United States from strategic inattention and put geostrategy abruptly back on the world map, he may inadvertently have done a favor not only for NATO but for the United States' friends in Asia. ∞



# India Risks Losing Out in a “Contest of Ideas”

**Brahma Chellaney**

India has watched with unease the Ukraine-related developments that have triggered Europe’s most serious geopolitical crisis since the end of the Cold War. These events threaten to unleash a new Cold War, or at least a renewed East-West ideological struggle. U.S. President Barack Obama’s new sanctions-based approach toward Russia in response to its annexation of Crimea sets the stage for a potential clash between Western democracy and what some U.S. ideologues have described as “Putinism.” Obama himself calls the crisis a “contest of ideas.” The question many are asking is whether this portends the advent of an ominous new era.

Russia has gained little from the annexation of Crimea, which was already under its de facto control. But it has displayed contempt for international law and lost a government in Kiev that had been friendly to Russian interests. Russia also faces sanctions-related costs at a time when its economy is already fragile and its borders remain precarious.

Yet the “contest of ideas” threatens to unhinge Obama’s rebalance toward Asia. Even before the Ukraine crisis began, many wondered whether this policy would acquire concrete strategic content or remain largely a rhetorical repackaging of policies begun under Obama’s predecessor. Now the United States could be forced to focus its attention on the states on Russia’s periphery, increasing the likelihood of a new Cold War. Thus far, Washington’s rebalance to Asia has remained more rhetorical than real, in part because of U.S. foreign policy’s preoccupation with the Middle East. Furthermore, the Obama administration has been reluctant to say or do anything that might raise Beijing’s hackles.

Asian states that rely on the United States as their security guarantor were jolted by Obama’s inaction

on the 2012 Chinese capture of Scarborough Shoal, located within the Philippines’ exclusive economic zone. This development occurred despite a U.S.-brokered deal under which both Beijing and Manila agreed to withdraw their vessels from the area. Obama’s silence on the capture, coupled with his administration’s apathetic attitude to the U.S. commitment to the Philippines under the Mutual Defence Treaty, emboldened China to effectively seize a second Philippine-claimed shoal, the Second Thomas/Ayungin Shoal, without attempting to evict the eight Filipino sailors living there.

Another jolt came when China established an air defense identification zone that usurped international airspace over the East China Sea and extended to Japanese- and South Korean-controlled islands or rocks. Washington refrained from postponing Vice President Joe Biden’s previously scheduled trip to Beijing or otherwise demonstrating its disapproval of the Chinese action beyond verbal statements but advised U.S. commercial airlines to respect the zone. This response conflicted with Japan’s advice to its commercial airlines to ignore China’s demand that they file their flight plans through the zone in advance.

These two events showed that the Obama administration, despite its rebalance toward Asia, will not act in ways detrimental to the United States’ close engagement with China. Washington indeed has declined to take sides in the bilateral disputes between China and its neighbors—unless, of course, U.S. interests are directly at stake, such as in freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. The Obama administration has also charted a course of neutrality on the recrudescence of Sino-Indian and Sino-Japanese territorial disputes.

Against this background, a protracted showdown with Russia over Ukraine would leave even less space for the United States to rebalance toward Asia. However, it will create greater space for China to disturb the territorial status quo in Asia. In a new Cold War setting, it will not be the United States but Russia that would likely pivot toward Asia. A sanctions-centered U.S. policy of selective containment of Russia could compel Moscow to cozy up with China, including to escape containment and to promote energy outflows and capital inflows. This may be particularly true if U.S. sanctions seek to bar Western investments in the Russian energy sector—a move that could prompt Moscow to reverse course and accept Chinese investments in “strategic” fields. Western sanctions against Russia could thus enable Beijing to gain important benefits, including more favorable terms for Russian energy resources and greater access to the Russian market for Chinese goods. Put simply, the only power likely to gain geopolitically from the recent turn of events in Ukraine is China, which remains a revolutionary power bent on upending the status quo in Asia. Its growing geopolitical heft has emboldened its muscle-flexing and territorial nibbling.

In order to isolate Russian president Vladimir Putin, Obama could be tempted to cede more space to Beijing in Asia. China’s geopolitical gains would be further solidified if the U.S. jettisons its post-Cold War policy of seeking to influence Russia’s conduct through engagement and integration. The United States is closing the door to Russian accession to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and effectively ousting Russia from the group of eight (G-8) by making it the group of seven again—an action that can only accelerate that institution’s growing irrelevance in international relations.

India, by contrast, could be a loser in a second Cold War that redivides states along a bipolar axis. India lost out in the first Cold War because of its reluctance to take sides. Although India has progressed from doctrinaire nonalignment to geopolitical pragmatism, it sees itself as a bridge between the East and the West,

not as a partisan. In the Ukraine crisis, New Delhi has treaded cautiously, supporting Ukraine’s territorial integrity but opposing sanctions on Russia. If a new Cold War is to be averted, a diplomatic solution must both protect Ukraine’s territorial integrity and respect Russia’s legitimate security interests. Ukraine should remain neutral between the East and the West—a sovereign buffer between NATO and Russia. India could help broker such a solution, which, while ensuring European peace, would also contribute to Asian security. ∞

# Taiwan Is No Crimea, But...

## Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine has received limited public attention in Taiwan, largely because of Taiwan's self-perceived weak influence over major international events and, more specifically, its distraction with political turmoil at home. The rapid change of status of Crimea came at a time when Taiwan's political parties and general public were sharply divided over whether the Legislative Yuan should ratify a controversial service trade agreement signed with China in June 2013.

Nonetheless, while the majority focused their eyes on domestic political events, quite a number of coolheaded scholars and experts in Taiwan's foreign policy community have engaged in serious discussions on the developing situation in Ukraine. Most believe the crisis and its possible impact on relations among great powers, though seemingly remote from Taiwan, will have long-term implications that will affect Taiwan and its relations across the strait with China. At least four issues of concern have been raised in relation to the Ukraine crisis: the future of the U.S. rebalance to the Asia-Pacific, Russia's ability to create a *fait accompli* in Crimea, the nature of "core interests," and the future of China-Ukraine military relations.

### U.S. Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific

Distractions to the U.S. rebalance continue to grow. Even with the concerns over sequestration and continuous defense budget cuts, most Taiwan elites remain confident that the U.S. refocus on Asia has been based on rational economic and security calculations involving many different capabilities, hard and soft. However, one cannot deny that existing and emerging global events will make this rebalancing strategy difficult to implement. Lingering problems in Syria,

Iran, Libya, Egypt, and Afghanistan will continue to drag the United States into many disputes in the Middle East and elsewhere. The Ukraine-Crimea situation will also keep leaders in Washington occupied in crisis-management mode, rather than focusing on Asia.

### Fait Accompli

The lightning-fast actions taken by Russian president Vladimir Putin—including sending paramilitary troops to control key naval bases and airports in Crimea, encouraging a quick referendum in Crimea before the international community could react, and deploying a significant Russian force along the Russia-Ukrainian border to keep military pressure on Kiev—created a *fait accompli* that has proved very hard for the United States and European Union to reverse. The urgent financial aid to Ukraine, economic sanctions against Russia, and exclusion of Putin from participating in the group of eight (G-8) summit may be the most the West can do in response, but Russian control of the Ukraine situation, particularly in Crimea, has already become firm.

The Chinese military, based on lessons learned from the Persian Gulf War, has long advocated the capability of achieving a "quick and decisive victory by winning the first battle," especially in the case of taking Taiwan by force. Putin's swift action in Crimea and the inability of the West to react quickly will serve as a significant reference for China. If the People's Liberation Army (PLA) can act quickly and put Taiwan firmly under its control, the rest of the world might have little choice but accept the *fait accompli*.

## Core Interests

For Russia, Ukraine is a significant buffer to the expanding influence of the EU. Maintaining a pro-Russia Ukrainian government is clearly in the interests of Russia. Historically, the Crimean Peninsula has been a strategic location for Russia to gain access to a warm-water port and to the Mediterranean. In other words, Ukraine and especially Crimea are among the core interests that Russia must defend. For the West, however, Ukraine and Crimea are not core interests. This gap in strategic value has fundamentally determined the fate and reality that Ukraine faces today.

More so than Tibet, Xinjiang, the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands, and the South China Sea, Taiwan has always been seen as the utmost core interest in China's political and strategic agenda. Consecutive leaders in Beijing have never been soft on the Taiwan issue when confronting international concern or pressure. For people in Taiwan, it is quite obvious that the West does not see Taiwan as an asset or an interest that must be defended at any cost, especially as China becomes the largest trading nation and second-largest economy in the world.

## China-Ukraine Military Relations

Ever since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia and Ukraine have been the largest sources of modern weapons systems and military technology for China's rapid, large-scale defense modernization. Ukraine alone has provided China with significant arms such as the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier (formerly the *Varyag*), Zubr-class hovercraft, and gas turbines in the PLA Navy's Type-052D Aegis destroyer. In addition, Chinese engineers, pilots, and navy technical experts have participated in training programs in Ukraine.

If Ukraine turns more toward the influence of the European Union, there could be setbacks for Chinese-Ukrainian military cooperation. But if Russia maintains a strong grip on Ukraine's future, that may mean an increase of Russian leverage in China's future

arms procurement. For Taiwan, in any case, the PLA's continuing force buildup can only tilt the military balance further in China's favor.

## Lessons for Taiwan...and China

Similar to the Russian-speaking majority in Crimea, ethnic Han Chinese constitute 98% of Taiwan's population. Yet Taiwan is no Crimea and would not vote to become part of China even if there were such a referendum. Taiwan is more like the rest of Ukraine, dangerously and unfortunately situated in a competition between great powers and simply trying to survive.

With his quickly consolidated power and forceful personal character, Chinese president Xi Jinping has laid out a "China dream" of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Xi made his first official foreign trip to Moscow shortly after becoming president, has advocated friendly diplomacy around China's periphery to offset the U.S. rebalancing strategy, established an air defense identification zone in the East China Sea to challenge a major status quo in East Asia, and visited the Sochi Winter Olympic Games, when most of the major Western leaders declined Putin's invitation.

For Taiwan, the real questions to ask are the following: What will Xi Jinping learn from Vladimir Putin's heavy-handed measures against Ukraine and Crimea? Would Xi quickly take Taiwan by force to protect China's core interest and create a fait accompli to which the international community can hardly react? And finally, could Xi be another Putin? ~



# Japan's "Proactive Contribution to Peace" and the Annexation of Crimea

Tetsuo Kotani

Russia's annexation of Crimea is a test of Japan's "proactive contribution to peace." Japan adopted its first national security strategy in December 2013, and its strategic priority is to produce a stable and predictable security environment through proactive engagement in international affairs. Given Russia's clear infringement of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, Japan needs to collaborate with the international community to protect the liberal, rule-based international order.

Although the Japanese government has stated that it would not acknowledge any change of status quo by force and imposed economic sanctions on Russia with other group of seven (G-7) countries, thus far Tokyo's response has been largely passive rather than proactive, aside from its offer of \$1.5 billion in aid to Ukraine. There are several reasons for the passive reaction. First, Tokyo and Moscow have been negotiating their territorial dispute over the Northern Territories/Kuril Islands as part of an effort to conclude a peace treaty unresolved since World War II. To further this cause, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has met President Vladimir Putin five times over the past year. Second, trade and investment between Japan and Russia are growing. Natural gas imports from Russia have become particularly important for Japan because all of its nuclear power plants were shut down following the Tohoku earthquake and subsequent nuclear disaster. Third, Russia is an important partner for Japan in balancing the rise of China. This is one of the reasons that Japan now has a two-plus-two meeting mechanism with Russia, although the countries have not concluded a peace treaty. Finally, according to a popular Japanese

perspective, the annexation of Crimea resulted from the European Union's failure to help ensure Ukraine's autonomy rather than Moscow's adventurism. For example, many Japanese think that the EU may have caused Putin to lose face and provoked him to take action, chiefly by moving toward endorsing Ukraine's provisional government during the Sochi Olympics.

Japan should adopt a more proactive approach to this situation by working with the international community to punish Russia for its invasion of foreign territory. This action is a reminder that Russia does not always comply with existing international law and norms. For example, it still justifies the occupation of the Northern Territories by appealing to secret agreements made at the Yalta Conference, held on the Crimea Peninsula in February 1945. Japan's reluctant stance on Crimea is unlikely to provide dividends in territorial negotiations with Russia; it will instead simply undermine the ruled-based international order.

In addition, Japan should not send the wrong message to Russia on economic sanctions. Japanese businesses are concerned about the effects of economic sanctions, whereas the country's political leaders are downplaying them. If Japan is not serious about sanctions, they will not shape Moscow's external behavior. Russia is "pivoting" to Asia and sees Japan as an important partner. Japan's economic sanctions could thus have a significant impact. By contrast, the position of the EU is weak because of its dependence on Russian energy.

The annexation of Crimea showed how a gray-zone scenario short of war can turn into a *fait accompli*.

Moscow used disguised troops and imposed a national referendum to occupy a foreign territory without war, justifying the entire process under the name of self-determination. The international community was just a bystander in these events. China is creating a similar gray-zone environment in the East China Sea by sending ships and aircraft to the vicinity of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands on a regular basis. If Japan appears reluctant to punish Russia for annexing Crimea, China may be emboldened to make the color of gray thicker around the Senkakus.

Japan should also take a proactive role on the Crimea issue from the viewpoint of its alliance with the United States. The U.S. rebalancing strategy presumes that there will be relative stability outside of Asia. Although the Obama administration has sought to end the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Middle East still presents numerous challenges. In particular, the civil war in Syria and the nuclear program of Iran remain sources of instability. The Russian annexation of Crimea is now destabilizing Eastern Europe, and if the situation in other parts of the world becomes worse, the United States may need to reassess its rebalance to the Asia-Pacific. Japanese collaboration with the United States on the Crimea issue may help the United States to maintain this policy.

There are widespread concerns in Japan about the United States' commitment to Japan's defense. President Obama did not pursue military options even after Syria crossed the red line he had set on the use of chemical weapons. With regard to Russia's annexation of Crimea, he gave verbal warnings to Putin but ruled out any military options from the beginning. The red lines that President Obama has set in Crimea are now a "red carpet" on which Russia is walking calmly. Although the United States has no treaty obligation to protect Syria or Ukraine, this red carpet diplomacy makes Japan and other U.S. treaty allies in Asia nervous. Because potential challengers to peace may be encouraged by any decline in U.S. credibility, while coordinating policies on Crimea, Japan should remind the United States of its role as the "world's policeman."

For Japan, the Crimean issue is not a fire on the other side of the river. It is a challenge to the liberal, rule-based international order with profound implications for Asian affairs. It is thus an important matter for the Japan-U.S. alliance as well as for Japan's security policy. The concept of a "proactive contribution to peace" should not be just rhetoric but a reality. The tensions in eastern Ukraine are still high. As a member of the G-7 but not a member of NATO, Japan can play a unique role in addressing this issue, particularly given its economic leverage in the Russian Far East. ∞

# The Korean Angle on Crimean Fallout: America's Perception Gap

Seong-hyon Lee

From Asia's perspective, the United States is not doing much to help the region shed the worries in some circles that U.S. power is declining. This view has gained steam amid a series of incidents that have raised concerns that the United States is abdicating its global responsibilities as a great superpower. Crimea is the latest example in that trend trajectory. The crisis cuts to the heart of a much broader debate in Asia over whether the United States is declining. The United States thus suffers from a gap in perception: it appears to underestimate how its actions and inaction are interpreted by the rest of the world, which has for decades looked up to the United States as a model.

In the view of many Asian observers, the United States did not assert its position on Crimea clearly enough through concrete actions and therefore created confusion. South Korea looks at the crisis from its own geopolitical security perspective. It is a country where "the rise of China" is keenly observed due to geographic proximity and historical experience. The crisis conjured up the old South Korean victimization psychology, which suggests that what happened to Crimea could happen to the Korean Peninsula as well. The immediate threat conjured in the popular South Korean imagination was that China could conduct similar acts with regard to North Korea. From this perspective, Seoul naturally questions the credibility of U.S. preparedness for such a contingency.

South Korea is a severely polarized country in terms of its views on North Korea and the United States. What is the best approach to North Korea? Is the

United States a model nation or a benign superpower that occasionally forces its views on its smaller allies? Depending on whom you ask, you get different answers. But what is certain is that there is a perception in South Korea that China's rise is a formidable reality in the region, one that is bound to change the present world order. Against this backdrop, the question remains: if the United States failed to dissuade Russia's advance into Crimea, can the United States manage China in Asia?

There were four incidents preceding the Crimean crisis that shaped Asian views of the U.S. response. The first was the ambiguity in the wording and definition surrounding the "new type of great power relations." China declared to the region that the United States bought into the idea of China's version of the Monroe Doctrine. According to this account, the United States recognized China's leadership in Asia, while China recognized the U.S. sphere of influence in Europe and the Middle East. The North Korean nuclear issue was supposed to serve as the testing ground for this new relationship between the United States and China, in which Washington believed it had gained Beijing's cooperation, but very little positive change was observed. While the United States has said that it rejects China's interpretation of this new relationship, the concept still raises serious concerns in Korea and elsewhere in Asia.

The second incident was president Obama's postponement of his planned trip to Asia last year. While Asian nations understood that the U.S. leader

was preoccupied with averting the “fiscal cliff,” that situation also demonstrated to Asian audiences that the United States faced a very tough domestic challenge that meant its leader could not afford to carry out a scheduled overseas commitment. This was unbecoming of a superpower and raised concerns in Asia about America’s ability to sustain its focus on the region.

Third, from a specifically Korean angle, there was frustration with the United States’ failure to deliver justice and proactively mediate the dispute between its two Asian allies: South Korea and Japan. The purported rationale was that the United States did not want to take sides, but some Korean strategists took Washington to be hedging between Seoul and Tokyo. By extension, this was seen as demonstrating a lack of confidence by the United States in handling its alliance relationships.

Fourth, South Korea has been disappointed by Washington’s lack of leverage over China to act on the North Korean nuclear issue. The dynamics of how a big power influences another big power are a keenly observed item by third-party audiences with respect to the pecking order of international leadership. The series of U.S. pronouncements about China’s supposed policy change on North Korea, including Obama’s famous statement that China was “recalculating” its posture, have yet to yield any real substance. The Chinese foreign ministry even made a statement late last year that it would continue to promote the “traditional friendly relationship” with North Korea in the wake of the bloody purge of Jang Song-thaek, the uncle of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The statement was surprising because it was given in the language of the Cold War era and indicates deepening China–North Korea ties, contrary to the common outside expectations.

From Crimea to North Korea, from the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands to the South China Sea, from the new Chinese air defense identification zone in the East China Sea to China’s human rights record, the United States has been increasingly seen in Asia as decreasing its commitment to uphold justice. Meanwhile, Beijing

has been making a robust charm offensive toward Seoul to lessen the latter’s traditional threat perception toward China and successfully drive a wedge between Seoul and Tokyo while Washington looked on. Seoul has also begun to gain a more sober understanding of the reality on the ground. Even if Washington makes its words loud and clear, declaring a “rebalance to Asia,” the United States will elect to prioritize its own interests in the end. There is a view that even if the United States has such a will to rebalance, it may not be able to put this policy into action due to its own capacity constraints.

As U.S. red lines shift in global hot spots, the United States also redefines its place in the world. Russia’s actions on Crimea were horrific. Yet they also strangely imbued a sense of awe in many observers; Russia demonstrated its red line and stuck to it through decisive actions. That is a type of leadership rarely seen these days. In the case of North Korea, Chinese interlocutors have long whispered in private conversations that Washington appears to lack a red line in dealing with Pyongyang. Some argue Washington’s red line is full nuclearization. Others believe it is nuclear proliferation. The United States’ choice to shift its red lines in dealing with China, North Korea, the Middle East, and Crimea creates the risk of miscalculation and the perception that Washington is unable to manage global crises as it confidently did in the past. Managing that perception will be the first order of business in re-establishing the United States’ global authority. ∞