



CDiSS COMMENTARY

National Defence University Malaysia (NDUM)
Centre for Defence and International Security Studies (CDiSS)

cdisscommentary.upnm.edu.my

No. 5 - 31 January 2020

CDiSS NDUM Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. CDiSS commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from CDiSS and due recognition to the author(s) and CDiSS. To contribute article and provide comment or feedback, please email the Editor at bahamzah8@hotmail.com

SOUTH KOREA, TURKEY, UKRAINE: THREE FRONT-LINE NATIONS WE CAN'T LET DRIFT AWAY

By
Kunihiko Miyake

What do Ukraine, Turkey, and South Korea have in common? Until recently, these three nations have never been strategically related to one another. This year, however, they all seem to have started drifting into chaos after becoming trapped in the new reality of international politics in the 21st century.

Turkey was once an Islamic empire that ruled the Middle East and parts of Europe. South Korea is a Northeast Asian nation with strong Confucian traditions. Ukraine, a former republic of the Soviet Union, is an Orthodox Christian nation of Eastern European. And all three, ironically, have a history of loyalty to past alliances.

Whether in the US-South Korea-Japan security mechanism, NATO, or the Soviet Union, these three were model nations that played a crucial role in maintaining and enhancing those once robust alliances. Now, however, they are departing from where we thought they belong.

To make matters worse, the West, in particular the United States, is responsible for the plight of these drifting frontline nations. To put it more bluntly, we are probably losing at least parts—if not all—of Ukraine, Turkey, and South Korea over the long run.

Ukraine

After the demise of the Soviet Union, Ukraine became an independent nation again. A series of incidents that caused domestic political turmoil, including two revolutions in Kiev, however, gave Russia a golden

opportunity. Moscow didn't hesitate to interfere in Ukraine's domestic politics and even annexed Crimea, which Russia had given to Ukraine in 1954.

For Russia, Ukraine has been and will continue to be one of its last lines of defense. Before the Orange Revolution took place in late 2004-early 2005, NATO had already expanded rapidly. Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary joined the alliance in 1999, and then the three Baltic states, Slovakia, Romania, and even Bulgaria followed in 2004.

Thus, by the mid-2010s Ukraine had become a fragile front-line nation trapped between Russia and NATO. Although Russian troops remain in eastern Ukraine, Moscow will not annex the area because this would only make the western part of Ukraine a NATO territory. What Moscow really wants is an unstable, but still unified, Ukraine.

Kiev, a non-member of NATO, of course needs more military assistance from the US. That's the nation to whose leader, President Donald Trump, made several phone calls, even sending his personal lawyer to Kiev, to request a bribery investigation related to his potentially most powerful political rival, former Vice President Joe Biden.

The new president of Ukraine was caught in quandary. Washington probably sent the wrong signal to Moscow, once again. Naturally, Ukraine has become more vulnerable to pressure from Russia. In other words, the West may not be able to rescue Kiev from the Russian quagmire, at least not for the foreseeable future.

Turkey

Although not a founding member of NATO, Turkey joined the alliance in 1952 with Greece and has been a dependable member of the alliance founded to deter the Soviet Union during the Cold War era. The tragedy of Turkey is that the European Union has not accepted, and probably will never welcome, Turkey's full membership.

By the turn of the century, Ankara, having learned that there would be no chance for Turkey to join the EU, must have modified its national strategy. Instead of trying to become European, Turkey, placing more emphasis on its Islamic traditions, must have decided to regain its influence, if not hegemony, in the Middle East.

The civil unrest since 2011 in Damascus and elsewhere gave Turkey a golden opportunity. Ankara started to implement its longtime ambitions, including eliminating Kurdish rebels in southern Turkey and northern Syria. By the time Turkey started to intervene in Syria, however, Russia and Iran were already there.

Thus, Turkey has become another drifting front-line nation for the West. Although it's a member of NATO, Turkey has purchased the S-400 Russian air defense system. Washington was furious, but alas, it was the US president

who allowed Turkey to launch a military intervention in northeastern Syria in exchange for a withdrawal of American troops from the area.

South Korea

Seoul, a faithful US ally in East Asia for decades, is now finding a golden opportunity to become the owner of its history—for the first time in the modern history of the Korean peninsula.

Having been driven crazy by their not-so-friendly neighbors for two millennia, the Koreans deserve their independence and political/cultural identity. South Korean President Moon Jae-in seems to believe in reconciliation with North Korea and China, while maintaining a robust security alliance with the US—which for us is daydreaming.

Thus, South Korea has become a drifting front-line nation in East Asia.

Then, again, Trump, out of intuition, coincidence or misjudgment, decided in March 2018 to meet in Singapore with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un—the "little rocket man"—who has no intent to denuclearize North Korea.

Now that he is talking directly to the US president, Kim sees no need to talk to the president of South Korea. This might have embarrassed Seoul in the negotiations for the denuclearization and normalization of the Korean peninsula. Once again, Washington managed to make the existing chaos even more chaotic.

French President Emmanuel Macron recently called NATO "brain dead." He was wrong. The US president said Macron's comment is insulting, but it wasn't. What is brain dead is neither NATO nor the other alliance systems the United States maintains. We all know what is brain dead, but I do not wish to waste time here going into that.

What we must do now is prevent Washington from making further mistakes out of intuition, coincidence or misjudgment. We must also save those three fragile front-line nations because they are too important for the West to lose. Let's hope that Washington has enough wisdom to keep them on our side.

Kuni Miyake (kunimofa@hotmail.com) is president of the Foreign Policy Institute and research director at Canon Institute for Global Studies.

This article was published in *Pacific Forum, PacNet#2* dated 17 January 2020.

CENTRE FOR DEFENCE AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY STUDIES (CDISS)
National Defence University of Malaysia
Sungai Besi Camp, 57000 Kuala Lumpur
Phone: (+603) 9051 3400 ext. 4618
Fax: (+603) 9051 3031
E-mail: cdiss@upnm.edu.my