

The Northeast Asian Rim : A Geopolitical Perspective

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Along with the fade out of the Cold War the world is undergoing a fundamental restructuring. The process is generally referred to regionalization and globalization. In this context, the paper presents a geopolitical perspective on the future of Northeast Asia. To meet the global trend, it is expected that the countries in the area organize an economically cooperative unity, the concept of which the author calls the northeast Asian Rim (NEAR). With its huge potentials to become the largest economic area in the world and with its rather complicated historical and social background, the Rim is tentatively supposed to have a loose and soft organization, to be flexible in dealing with the intra- and interregional relations. The idea underlying the view is that the former area of confrontation between the land power and the sea power is, under the new world environment, going to recover its proper locational attributes and develop into a merging area, a new core. As a physical framework of the Rim a spatial structure is assumed to consist of two sub-rims and two development axes with four development centers.

Key Words: regionalization, geopolitics, Cold War, restructuring, heartland, rimland, area of confrontation, merging area, spatial structure

1. Backgrounds

The world map is changing. The traditional map is being substituted by a new economic map. The familiar bi-polar images of the post-war world is rapidly being reshaped into a less-acquainted tri-polar or multi-polar world. No dominant principle, structural or functional, seems to work in this process of global change. The phenomena is called globalization and/or regionalization.

Anyway, it seems to be a territorial process. Territorial restructuring reflecting na-

tional economic interests is taking place all over the world. Economic activities are interwoven internationally and are becoming more and more complicated, that is to say, the national boundary in production, distribution and consumption of goods and services is getting less rigid. Free trade and multi-national corporations are blooming at the end of this industrial century. It is confusing, but there must be some order. Scholars are looking for adequate explanations for it. What really is regionalization? How does it occur and with which consequences?

First, it may be regarded as a process of recovery: political grouping of nations by

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ideology into "bad guys" and "good guys" prohibited the 'natural' development of economic activities in geographic terms. Along with the demise of the so called Cold War system, the world economy is recovering its geographical rule, spatial interaction after economic principle. Spatial accessibility, functional complementarity and economy of scale are important concepts in understanding regional division of labor and economic blocks.

Second, it is a logical consequence of the development of market economy. In other words, when favorable social and physical conditions such as efficient transportation and communication systems are given, a national economy will tend to grow by acquiring larger and larger market even outside of its boundaries. Goods are mass-produced and transported into other neighboring markets at lower cost. The national economy achieves comparative advantage and economy of scale by acquiring larger action space.

Third, in a modern welfare state, a nation's power is generally defined in economic terms, and the military overriding of other nation's territories is losing its usefulness. Thus, traditional military interactions between neighboring countries are giving way to economic ones.

If economic interests prevail the international relations today, the economy is more than the economy itself. It also is a means of getting domestic welfare and international stabilizing power that every nation is seeking. Thus, theoretically, security of a nation would be best guaranteed through its economic wealth, welfare of its people, and cooperative association with other national economies.

EEA and NAFTA is leading the trend. Continental and subcontinental economic blocks are being formed. In Asia, ASEAN is following the trend. APEC, EAEG and many others are also being proposed or conceptualized. In Northeast Asian realm the Yellow Sea Rim (環黃海圈) and the East Sea Rim

(環東海圈) are proposed,¹⁾ among others. Northeast Asian countries are to form a more closely related regional economic organization, the conception of which has been hindered by the ideological confrontation of so called Cold War system since 1945. The author's idea is to combine the above two rims, naming it as the Northeast Asian Rim (NEAR). In spite of rather complicated historical background and cultural heterogeneity, the area is endowed with enormous potential of economic development through mutual cooperation.

2. Geopolitics of Northeast Asia

1) Classical Geopolitical Concepts

Geopolitics as a scientific discipline faded out after World War II. The main criticism on geopolitics as a science was focused on its deterministic character. But it was abused and kicked out of the academic circle decisively for its unclean past. For example being employed in special pleading to promote the interest of particular nations or ideologies. Nazis distorted the theories and concepts of it to justify Germany's growth at the expense of its neighbors as 'natural'. Post-war German geographers did not wanted to be connected with this 'ugly' discipline. They said "geopolitics, never again!", and gave up an important geographic tradition. Not much different was the situation in Japan after the War. "Great East Asian Sphere of Co-prosperity (大東亞共榮圈)" was, so to speak, nothing but an Asian version of 'Lebensraum'. It is interesting that Karl Haushofer, the founder of the "Zeitschrift für Geopolitik", served for a period before the War as military attaché of the German embassy in Tokyo.

Though once stigmatized, geopolitics should not to be discarded as waste. It still offers one of the most useful ways of thinking in locational problems, especially in a global or continental scale. It can be easily traced that in many strategic decisions of the world powers geopolitical con-

siderations have played decisive roles.

A. Mahan emphasized the importance of controlling sea lanes in order for a state to protect commerce and wage economic warfare. He therefore advocated a large navy (Mahan, 1890). Mahan suggested six fundamental factors that affect the development and maintenance of sea power: geographical position, physical formation of a state, extent of territory, population numbers, national character, and government character. He recognizes a core area in Asia and Russia's domination of it: He assumes a struggle between Russian land power and British sea power (Mahan, 1900). This notion of confrontation between the land power and the sea power took place. Since then it has been in the center of geopolitical world view.

H. Mackinder's approach to global strategy was similar to that of Mahan, but with a different emphasis and different forecasts (Mackinder, 1904). Mackinder expressed the view that there was a Eurasian Core Area, protected by inaccessibility from naval power, that could shelter a land power that might come to dominate the world from its continental fortress. Mackinder called this Eurasian Core Area the Pivot Area (Mackinder, 1919). Later he broadened this strategic concept into the Theory of Heartland (Mackinder, 1919).²⁾

Mahan and Mackinder made a significant contribution to our perspectives of the world, and in a broad sense their assumptions about a core area or heartland were substantiated. However, there were three major weaknesses as in Mackinder's work (Mackinder, 1943). First, he did not give enough weight to the growing power of North America; Second, he failed to explain the seeming contradiction between his thesis of the power of the possessors of the Heartland and the relative weakness of Russia until World War II; And third, he didn't take into account the growing importance of air power and other technological developments. Like Mahan, he oversimplified his-

tory and leaned too much towards determinism.

N. Spykman (1942) saw, however, the real power potential of Eurasia in what Mackinder called "Inner Marginal Crescent." He called this "the Rimland". Spykman, therefore, composed his own dictum.³⁾

Spykman advocated the Allies to base their postwar policy on preventing any consolidation of the Heartland. This policy became fundamental in the anti-communist position of the western powers. The so called "containment" policy of the Cold War era seems to be rooted basically in this perspective.⁴⁾

It is true that all these geostrategic views have flaws, but they have outstanding holistic perspectives which are good for analyzing the interdependent world. As shown above, geopolitical concepts, despite many differences, were characterized by an "acceptance of the proposition that confrontation was endemic in the system." Within this general perspective, notions of hegemony and dominance have tended to prevail and manifest themselves in many ways. It was in geopolitics revived after the seventies, that the more flexible, humanistic approaches began to take place.

2) A New Geopolitics of Northeast Asia : the Merging Area

In Northeast Asia as like in Europe, the two main geostrategic theories (of the heartland and of the rimland) are practiced. Land power and sea power were keenly confronted in the name of political ideology. Korea was divided into two and underwent a tragic civil war. The Korean War was actually the scapegoat of this experiment of confrontation. Beside historical backgrounds, international conflicts of this area in the last century could well be explained by this kind of geostrategic interpretation. Superficially, many conflicts have been coated with ideological colors.

In an era of intercontinental ballistic missile (I.C.B.M.) and space travel, the military

aspect of traditional geostrategy is becoming less useful. Moreover, together with the closing of ideological confrontation, the so called Cold War is coming to an end.

Consequently, geopolitics of global competition and regional cooperation is becoming more and more importance. Economic cooperation at regional level becomes vital. The formation of economic blocks shows it. It is, however, just the beginning. Cooperation in cultural and ecological field will follow. We cannot exactly predict the future progress, but the regional block economy should be developed into a world economy, because it is the way to free trade in an open world. In this context, it may be a prelude leading to the main event. Nobody knows, nevertheless, how long it will take, before globalization is realized. It is also possible that the main event of globalization won't come at all, and the globalization at national and regional levels may remain as the final stage. Anyway, the formation of regional blocks has become the prevailing trend and will last at least for the coming decades.

The fade out of the Cold War system is opening a new era for Northeast Asia. Northeast Asia currently consists of the following nations: China (incl. Taiwan), Russia, Mongolia, Korea (North and South) and Japan which face the Pacific toward the east and surrounds the East Sea and the Yellow Sea. The land power and the sea power that have been confronting each other are merging together, transforming the former area of military conflict into a new area of economic cooperation. It means that the geopolitics of Northeast Asia is changing fundamentally.

Actually there is no physical change in topographic structure of this area, but the function is shifting very rapidly. In other words, the geopolitical properties of the area are being recovered from the past ideological constraints. We may call it recovery if they beat their swords into plough-shares and their spears into pruning hooks, be-

cause iron and steel is better used for tools than weapons. The military map is being reshaped into an economic one. The interaction between the nations will be defined by the movement of goods and services, rather than by munitions and hostile words. As the political obstacles in the area are being removed, the intraregional economic interactions are increasing rapidly.

To survive in the global economic competition, to cope with the trend of regionalization, and to be prosperous together in peace, a multilateral cooperative system of countries in this area is necessary and even compulsory.

3. Towards a New Order

1) Prospects and Potentials

If the international politics shifts from war to peace and from confrontation to cooperation and competition so will the geopolitical perspectives, from a military strategic one to an economic, cultural and ecological one. Consequently, the military powers will merge into a highly integrated regional economic system. As mentioned above, Northeast Asia has a potential to grow to the largest and most powerful economic area in the world, the positive factors of which are as follows:

First, the area is located at the center of the largest territorial entity, the Asian continent and the Pacific Ocean. It enjoys the largest action space (potential scale) of economy with optimal climatic conditions for human activities.

Second, it possesses tremendous deposits of important raw materials, like coal, iron, oil and natural gas, timber, agricultural products, etc., which has been laid dormant in a closed system behind the curtain.

Third, it has the largest population with high density providing the potential for a huge market and labor supply in the area. The people are apt to learn, tolerant and diligent, which are characteristics essential to high quality labor.

Fourth, the area may appear quite heterogeneous, but on the whole it belongs to one cultural area. The area has the tradition of agrarian society of rice cultivation. Confucianism and the use of Chinese characters is also common, as well as sharing similar ways of thinking, if not the level of westernization or modernization.

Fifth, there are strong complementarities among the national economies of the area. High technology, capital and managerial know-how of the developed countries in the area can be transferred to the developing countries. Former socialistic countries can also benefit from the capitalistic experiences of neighboring countries.

2) Problems

Compared to Europe and North America, there are lots of obstacles for Northeast Asia in becoming an economic area :

First, There still remains political and military tension in the area, between North and South Korea as well as between China and Taiwan. These relics of the Cold War would not last very long, but are still active enough to hinder free trade.

Second, there lingers the complicated historical background, especially in relations to Japan, who once invaded and annexed other neighboring nations. All the previously occupied nations believe that Japan is not yet ready to establish cooperative relations with her neighbors, because she did not apologize sincerely for its past atrocities, neither in words nor in actions.

Third, militarily as well as politico-economically, the tie between the United States and the nations in the area is so strong that some nations would not regardlessly dare to participate in an exclusive and tight regional organization. For instance Korea and Japan may face the tough question of which one they should choose between, NAFTA or Northeast Asian Rim.

Fourth, Russia, China and Japan would not easily give up the effort for military and political hegemony over the area. They

are not used to getting along as a non-power state, and would try to exercise dominance over other nations at every chance, raising conflicts.

Fifth, every country is looking for markets for their own products, but it seems that there is no market big enough presently in the area. To be successful as an economic area, there should be at least one big market, which usually is offered by the most developed and rich country in the area (like the United States in North America). In Northeast Asia, Japan, the only nation who can afford it, is not likely to supplant the United States function of absorber of Asian goods.

Sixth, The level of economic development and the trade relationship of each country is so different, that a horizontal combination of national economies would hardly function. A vertical integration would of course work. In this case, the development disparity would increase in favor of Japan, resulting in structural dependencies, which the area absolutely doesn't want to see.

Besides, the socio-economic institution as well as physical infrastructure of each country are so diverse, and some of them are too primitive to accommodate and support modern economic activities efficiently.

Consequently, it seems hardly possible for the area to organize such a tightly organized economic block like the EC and NAFTA, at least not in the near future. This is the reason why the author proposes to apply a rather soft and flexible concept (Northeast Asian Rim) instead of an exclusive and rigid one.

4. Perspective on the Spatial Structure

With the increasing spatial interactions in the area, there will evolve a new spatial structure. Development centers and subcenters will emerge, which will be linked by development axes across the area. Tokyo,

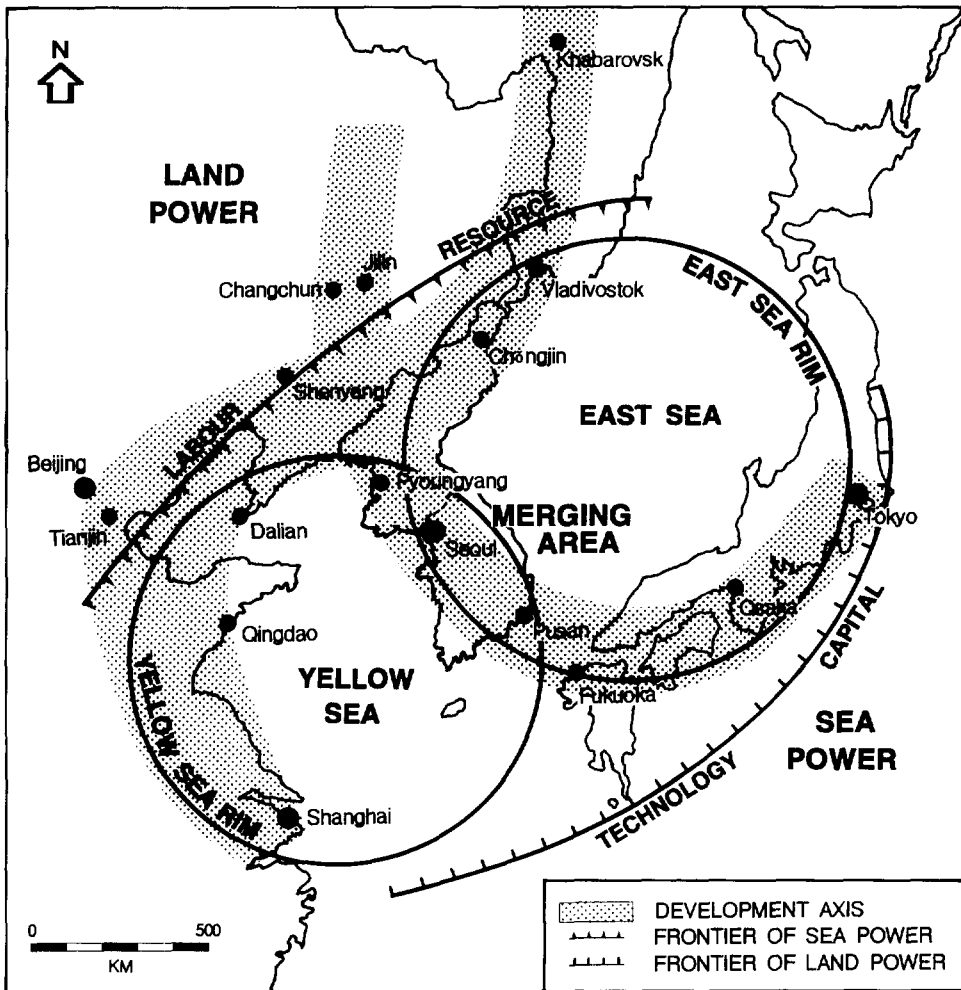


Figure 1. Geopolitical conception of Northeast Asia.

Seoul, Beijing and Shanghai, all of which are growing to become world cities, will function as development centers and compete head to head to acquire the leading position, i.e. to be the hub of Northeast Asia. Harbor cities like Vladivostok, Chongjin, Dalian, Tianjin, Qingdao, Nampo, Pusan, Fukuoka, Shimonoseki, Osaka and many others are expected to get new impulses for growth, and will function as subcenters.

Northeast Asian Economic Area is comprised of two sub-rims: The East Sea Rim and the Yellow Sea Rim. The coastal zones of both rims will benefit from the creation

of an economic area and also contribute most actively for further development of the area. These two ring-shaped coastal zones offer the basis for the formation of future development axes of the whole area. By connecting the two ring together and matching it with the former frontiers of the land power and the sea power, we may get the two development axes that will lead the spatial development of the area.⁵⁾

The main development axis will be the coastal belt stretching from Russian Far East (Komsomolsk-Khabarovsk-Vladivostok) over Tumen River Basin and Manchu-

ria (-Harbin-Changchun-Shenyang) and/or North Korea (-Chongjin-Hamhung-Sinuiju-Dalian)-Tianjin, Qingdao to Shanghai. In the north, the TSR(Trans-Siberian Railroad) and the BAM (Baikal-Amur Mainline) connect the area via Russia with Europe, while in the south it will be linked westward to the main routes of inland China, which may remind us of the old Silk Road.

The secondary development axis is supposed to start in Japan (Tokyo-Osaka-Fukuoka), run northward along the Korean peninsular (Pusan-Seoul-Pyongyang), and split from here into two directions: In the east, after crossing the primary axis in Manchuria (-Jilin-Changchun-Harbin-) and Mongol, it will stretch northward to connect the area with Europe. In the west, after crossing the primary axis at Bohai bay (Sinuiju-Dalian-Tianjin-Beijing), it will run to Ulanbator and further northward to Russia to connect with Europe.

Assuming that the two development axes will cross in the middle of the rim, we realize anew the geopolitical importance of Manchuria and Korea. The region has been suffering under severe military confrontations throughout the 20th century, and is now expected to merge from the conflicts and play the central function in the coming century, both of which came about and will come about by virtue of its importance in geopolitical location. Along with these development axes transportation and communication network will be extended, and accompanied by urbanization and industrialization. The effects of which are expected to spread to the rest of the area.

As shown in the attached map, the East Sea and the Yellow Sea are going to become the 'Mediterranean Seas' of Northeast Asia. Keeping these two seas in peace and order will be a vital task for the stability of the area, not to mention their ecological significance for the area and the world.

5. Concluding Remarks

If Mackinder called the North Atlantic "the Midland Ocean," and designated the area from Volga to the Rockies as "the main geographical habitat of Western civilization"(Mackinder, 1924, p.251.), the Pacific Ocean in the 21st century will be the "the World Ocean" and the land area around it "the main habitat of the global civilization."

Now, the cease of Cold War is opening up opportunities for a host of reorientations. The concept of Northeast Asian Rim is one of them. It asks for revolutionary shift in thinking. An area of many serious confrontations will emerge as a new core integrating the largest economic area of the world. In the beginning of the next century, the area would be the most powerful territorial unit in the global economy. There are still lots of socio-economic as well as physical obstacles in the way, not to mention the possible struggle for political hegemony and the ecological concerns. Anyhow, the motor began to roll and makes its own way. In conclusion, the following statements could be made regarding to the future of the Northeast Asian Rim :

First, the development will be slow at the beginning, and be accelerated with time. It will arrive at its full speed after the reunification of Korea, probably in the very beginning of the next century.

Second, introducing a kind of open regionalism and soft organization would help the area to deal with intraregional frictions as well as interregional conflicts with flexibility. Similarly, it is not supposed for the area to hasten and jump over the initial stages of cooperation. It would be better to begin with an enlargement of trade volume followed by direct investment and free trade, and try to be integrated as an economic community before reaching the final stage of global free trade.

Third, questions are still open: Will the

organization develop and arrive at the final stage at all? And will it extend to an intercontinental organization like Pan-Pacific Rim eventually? Considering that the world is undergoing a regional polarization process of economic power, and assuming a tripolar system of North America, Europe and Northeast Asia, a regional economic block, even if loosely organized, seems to be unavoidable for the area.

Fourth, Japan is in a situation to play the leading role in realizing the concept. At the same time her responsibility as a developed nation, with capital and technology, should be more emphasized than it shows presently. It may sound unfair, but it is. To be co-prosperous, as she said half a century ago, the rich has more to contribute to the community.

Last, but not the least, attention should be given to the environmental preservation. One cannot overemphasize the importance of the environment, especially when an industrialization is going on with an unprecedented speed and scale.

(Received November 30, 1993)

Notes

- 1) Many seminars and symposia on the economic cooperation of Northeast Asian countries are held. It seems that the Japanese give more attention to the East Sea (Sea of Japan) Rim, while the Chinese are primarily interested in the Yellow Sea Rim: cf. Papers presented to the Pohang International Symposium: *The International Order of Development and Cooperation in Korea East Sea Rim*, 1992, Pohang Institute of Science and Technology, Pohang, Korea.
- 2) Mackinder (1919) composed the famous hypothesis in his book.: "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland, Who rules

the Heartland commands the World Island, Who rules the World Island commands the World."

- 3) Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia, Who rules Eurasia controls the destination of the world (Spykman, 1942).
- 4) The containment policy itself was proposed by George Kenan (Glassner, 1993, p.228).
- 5) For detailed discussion of the development axes in the area and especially its relevance to the Korean Peninsular where the two axes are assumed to cross, confer to Woo-ik Yu (1992).

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지정학적 관점에서 본 동북아권

류 우 익*

냉전체제의 종식과 더불어 세계질서에는 근본적인 개편이 일어나고 있다. 그 과정은 지구화와 지역화로 일컬어지고 있다.

본 연구는 이런 관점에서 동북아의 미래에 관한 지정학적 전망을 제시한다. 지정학은 2차대전 당시 정치적으로 오용된 후로 지리학으로부터 추방되었고, 지금도 학계에서는 금기시 되고있는 분야이다. 그러나 필자는 지정학이 그러한 더러운 과거와 관계없이 대륙적 내지 아대륙적 규모의 지역간 문제를 이해하는데 유용한 개념을 가지고 있다고 보았다. '지정학적 위치의 특성'이라는 말은 구어로 사용되고 있는 이상으로 국제관계를 규정하는 부동의 배경으로 작용해 왔다. 그리고 지금 일어나고 있는 변화를 예측하고 대응하기 위해서, 동북아시아, 특히 한국의 입장에서는 지정학적 관점이 유용한 사고의 틀이 될 수 있을 것이라고 보았다.

국제경제의 지역블록화라는 지구적 추세에 대응하여 동북아시아의 국가들은 경제협력체를 구성하게 될 것으로 기대된다. 필자는 이를 동북아권(NEAR : Northeast Asian Rim)이라고 부르기를 제안한다. 동북아권은 공간의 규모, 노동력의 양과 질, 부존자원과 기술 및 자본 등 세계최대의 경제지역으로 발전할 수 있는 거대한 잠재력을 지니고 있다. 그러나 복잡한 역사적 배경으로 인해서 당분간은 비교적 느슨한 조직이 될 수 밖에 없을 것이며, 또 그래야 역내 국가간 및 타지역과의 관계를 원만히 유지해 나갈 수 있을 것이다. 이

지역협력체의 향방과 거기서의 각국의 역할은 앞으로 동북아시아 뿐만 아니라 신 세계질서에 큰 변수가 될 것이다.

이러한 관점에 깔려있는 기본적인 생각은 국제관계의 근본적인 재구조화가 지리적 위치 및 속성과 그 조직의 특성에 기초하여 이루어질 것이라는 데에 있다. 냉전 종식 이후의 새로운 국제환경 하에서 각 지역과 국가의 새로운 국제환경 하에서 각 지역과 국가는 고유의 지리적 속성을 회복하게 될 것이며, 그에 따라 지난날 대륙세력과 해양세력이 첨예하게 대립했던 갈등지역은 경제적 교류가 활발히 이루어지는 융합의 지역으로 변하게 될 것이다. 이데올로기 대립으로 자유로운 발전에 제약을 받았던 지역은 국제정치적 족쇄가 풀리면서 오히려 새로운 발전의 전기를 얻게 될 것이다.

이렇게 봄으로써 필자는 대립과 갈등을 전제로 했던 과거의 지정학이 국제화와 세계화의 새로운 추세를 맞아 경쟁과 협력의 지정학으로 다시 태어날 수 있는 가능성을 타진해보고자 하였다.

동북아권의 공간적 틀로는 두 개의 부분권(sub-rim : 황해권과 동해권)과 두 개의 발전축(종축 및 횡축) 및 네 개의 발전거점(동경, 서울, 북경, 상해)이 상정되었다.

主要語 : 지역화, 지정학, 냉전, 재구조화, 심장부, 주변부, 갈등지역, 융합지역, 공간구조

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