

# **Transformation of the Regional Security Agenda in Northeast Asia in the Post-Covid Period: Non-Military Aspects**

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## Abstract

The global pandemic of Covid-19 has made very serious adjustments to the development of both international and regional and national processes. Significant progress has been made in almost all areas.

Northeast Asia is no exception. Rather, on the contrary, the region again distinguished itself by its "dissimilarity" to other regions of the world.

Let's start with China. This country, which is one of the two largest economies in the world, is still demonstrating its own approach to the issue of the pandemic. The approach is very tough, with the use of lockdowns even when only 1 case is detected. The country's borders are still locked up, which leads to very serious economic, social, and trade consequences, both within the country and for neighboring countries, for the entire Northeast Asia region.

It must be assumed that China, when it opens (when it happens) will already be a completely different country than it was before 2020. Serious political and technological transformations are underway in the country. And this, of course, will affect the further development of the entire region.

In the meantime, these processes have had a very strong impact on migration issues. Thus, in the Russian Far East, there is a severe shortage of workers (the shortage of which was made up for by China, as well as partly by North Korea). Japan (despite its closed nature) is also experiencing a shortage of skilled labor. South Korea and Taiwan are experiencing a shortage of, on the contrary, unskilled labor, but the pace of migration has also slowed down significantly.

In China itself, there is also an acute shortage of labor reserves, and the number of foreigners in the country during the pandemic has fallen several times.

And this is just one of the problems. Significant growth in transport services, deterioration in logistics and delivery times, crisis in the construction industry and much more.

2020 and 2021 have become truly unpredictable for the entire international agenda. The coronavirus pandemic has made very serious adjustments to all processes in world politics and the

economy, making this year the most unusual and strange in all 75 years after the Second World War. Never before in all these decades have almost all borders been closed, air traffic has not stopped, such strict lockdowns have not been introduced, and such mass hysteria has begun with or without it. By the end of 2020, the economies of most countries began to experience a severe recession, national governments began to provide unprecedented social support to the population, as well as small and medium-sized businesses. In addition, the number of cases and deaths from a new disease has become unprecedented.

There have been changes and transformations in the Russian-Chinese border area. For the first time since 1987, since the normalization of Soviet-Chinese relations, the opening of borders and the start of bilateral exchanges, the Russian-Chinese border was closed. Passenger traffic has been completely stopped, and trade has significantly decreased.

The situation with the pandemic has led not only to the actualization of threats in the field of epidemiological and bacteriological safety (on the regional and global agenda). The closure of borders, a decrease in the level of migration flows, as well as trade turnover, led to a number of threats to economic security.

So, in the Amur region, and in a number of other neighboring Far Eastern regions (Khabarovsk Territory, Primorsky Territory), they very quickly and acutely felt the shortage of Chinese labor. The number of labor migrants from the Middle Kingdom dropped to almost zero, and this led to a crisis in the construction industry. As it turned out, there is simply no one to replace Chinese workers at most construction sites in the Amur region. Migrants from the countries of Central Asia have very low qualifications and are not suitable for all types of work, and Russians do not want to work. And during 2020 and 2021, there was a shortage of a number of construction specialties, in particular masons (whose wages have increased several times). This led to an increase in construction time, not a single object was commissioned on time (including social ones, such as a school). In addition, this was one of the factors (the second factor was the Far Eastern mortgage) of a significant increase in housing prices in the Amur Region, which grew by 80-90% over the year. In 2020, the outflow of population from the region was significantly reduced due to the pandemic. However, given that the factors contributing to migration processes have not gone away, and housing prices have increased significantly, we can assume a significant increase in the number of internal migrants leaving the Amur Region after the end of the pandemic (housing can be sold for more and bought in any western region with more larger area).

In general, the pandemic has shown the dependence of the economic development of the macroregion on migrants, on the number of work permits issued. A clear state policy is needed in relation to migrants, primarily labor migrants, with possible privileges in this matter for the Far East. After the opening of the borders, this issue will become even more acute.

There are a number of threats to economic security, which together or individually very seriously lead to an imbalance in the entire region, increasing the level of instability, maximizing potential and turning them into real threats to regional security.

First of all, we are talking about the energy sector, the threats to energy security. In this area, the region can also be called "the most-most ..." in several areas at once. It is North-East Asia that demonstrates the highest growth rates of energy consumption, the highest demand for hydrocarbon raw materials, moreover, it is NEA that is the main locomotive in the world for the development and implementation of renewable energy sources.

Energy security in Northeast Asia largely depends on the intensification of cooperation between the countries of the region, that is, on security through cooperation. And, above all, from the interaction of the East Asian states with Russia.

It is NEA that can become a “cradle” for a number of global trends:

1. The transformation of natural gas into the main energy resource of the planet (with the displacement of oil from the podium).
2. Reducing the share of coal in the energy sector of China, Taiwan, Japan, and then other countries.
3. It is the countries of Northeast Asia, and, above all, Japan and the Republic of Korea, that can become a bridge, a platform for dialogue, economic interaction and the resumption of strategic relations between Russia and Western countries (in the medium term).

Thus, energy security, both at the country level and at the regional level, is one of the most problematic areas with a high level of potential threats. The sub-region of Northeast Asia is one of the most dynamically developing, having the most technologically advanced economies, with a high level of potential. And if during the beginning of the pandemic, there was a certain reduction in the pace of the economic, now we can observe reverse processes. And in this regard, absolutely all countries of the region (with the exception of the regions of the Russian Far East) are energy-deficient states, while with a constant, and sometimes rapid, growth in consumption.

For quite a long time, the point of view prevailed that the most acceptable for the countries of the region (and not only for Northeast Asia) was the development of nuclear energy. However, the accident at the Fukushima-1 nuclear power plant in 2011 in Japan cast doubt on this axiom. A more intensive (it was carried out earlier) development of renewable energy sources began.

One of the key problems of China's energy security is the very high share of coal energy consumption (and, consequently, very serious environmental problems) - more than 60%, as well as a serious dependence on suppliers and communications. In this regard, China is very zealously developing a system of renewable energy sources. The Chinese leadership announced the start of building an "ecological civilization" and plans to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030 (which became a kind of sensation).

After the accident at the nuclear power plant, there are certain difficulties with ensuring energy security in Japan. Not only does the country live in the almost complete absence of natural resources, its own energy resources, but after 2011, the operation of nuclear power plants ceased. The country was forced to turn again to fossil energy resources, investing heavily in the development of coal deposits around the world. It is heavily criticized. And only in 2022, the Japanese leadership announced plans to stop this process and invest in the development of new technologies in the field of renewable energy sources.

It has a high potential for the development of renewable energy sources. However, there is still a lot to be done on this path, and hydrocarbon neutrality is rather a long-term perspective, not for the next 20-30 years. Therefore, it is necessary to build the foundations of national and regional security in Northeast Asia based on modern realities, building up interaction between the countries of the region in a variety of areas.

The problems of migration have also become very relevant for the states of Northeast Asia in recent years. They carry both a security threat and an opportunity for further development. None of the countries in the region has escaped manifestations of at least some aspects of migration

processes. Each has its own characteristics, which certainly affect the overall state of regional security. On the territory of the Russian Far East, the outflow of the population within the framework of internal Russian migration prevails. The entire modern period, the Far East demonstrates a positive balance in the framework of international migration. Most of the migrants by country of origin are citizens of the former Soviet republics. One of the most pressing issues is the level of crime, which exceeds such indicators in the western regions of Russia by 30 percent or more. At the same time, migrant crime also contributes to these indicators. However, the shortage of labor resources in the Far East also needs to be filled. And the only way is to attract migrants from the countries of Southeast Asia, India, North Korea. An urgent review of political and legal institutions in the field of migration is needed.

China today also faced a number of problems and threats in the field of demography and migration. The aging of the population, the need for economic growth and short-sighted population policies have led to the fact that in the past few years, China has begun to struggle for highly skilled migrants. Beijing will experience an acute shortage of the able-bodied population, and it is not yet possible to reverse the negative demographic trends within the country. In the near future, China will attract new migrants and integrate them into its new social system, with ratings and penalties.

The Republic of Korea, as well as Taiwan, and Japan are faced with the problems of most developed countries - the aging of the population, as well as the reluctance of the local population due to the relatively high standard of living, to engage in non-prestigious work. Japan and the Republic of Korea have been characterized by depopulation in recent years. At the same time, they solve this problem in different ways. The influx of migrants leads to an increase in crime (which is so not wanted in Japan), the rights of migrants themselves in the field of labor and social legislation are often violated (Taiwan). Taiwan is the most adapted to migration processes, due to the fact that society itself is a migrant society, the Republic of Korea is attracting more and more low-skilled labor. And Japan, starting from 2023, risks becoming a new center of attraction for migrants from all over the world, due to upcoming changes and relaxations in migration legislation.

It should be noted that, despite the existing stereotypes, or the reluctance to attract migrants in the previous period (Japan), or the seeming lack of need for them (China), absolutely all countries of the region have become involved in regional and international migration processes. At the same time, trying to solve their economic and social problems, and, if possible, minimizing the risks and security threats emanating from migration.

The deterioration of the environmental situation almost always occurred in parallel with the rapid economic growth in certain countries or regions of the planet. Therefore, all known "growth points" of the second half of the 20th century, one way or another, were accompanied by serious environmental problems. Japan was the first to face very acute, most complex threats to environmental security, and a little later, the Republic of Korea and Taiwan.

In the recent past, China, Mongolia, as well as the Eastern regions of Russia faced the most acute environmental crisis.

In Japan and the Republic of Korea, the situation has somewhat normalized in recent years. But at the same time, due to the accident at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, the Land of the Rising Sun took a significant step back, again switching to fossil energy resources, primarily coal. Giant

sums were invested in the development of deposits around the world. However, since 2020-2021 there has been a tendency to improve the situation, the government of the country began to invest heavily in the development of innovative renewable energy sources and set plans to achieve a significant share of the latter in the country's overall energy balance. The Republic of Korea, which until 2022 stubbornly announced plans to abandon nuclear power plants (due to the same accident in Japan), since the spring of 2022, with the coming to power of the new President, has radically changed its point of view. And Seoul officially announced plans to develop nuclear energy, the possibility of building new nuclear power plants not only in its own country, but in other states and regions. What is also important for improving the environmental situation, minimizing threats to environmental security in Northeast Asia.

The rapid economic development of China, its environmental problems, as well as similar problems in Taiwan, Russia, Mongolia, make the threats to environmental security in Northeast Asia extremely relevant and bring them almost to the first place among non-military security threats that threaten the existence of not only citizens of countries region, but for the whole of humanity.

In this regard, it is extremely important to establish a multilateral, regional dialogue in this direction with concrete practical solutions. It is necessary to come to the realization of the priority of ecology over the economy, most energy projects should also carry a powerful environmental component.

In addition to threats, the existing problems of environmental security also provide a number of potential opportunities, provide a kind of roadmap for the development of interaction and cooperation between countries that can mutually enrich and complement each other in this area. In the context of mutual political confrontation, the sanctions of Japan and South Korea against Russia, the presence of a huge number of territorial disputes between the powers, the growth of military budgets, the rearmament of the armed forces, military exercises of various scales, directions, and the number of participating countries, it is environmental policy that can become the foundation of a dialogue , cooperation and interaction.