

# About the New Silk Road in the East Sea Rim

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## From the perspective of civilization history

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### Abstract

Far East Asia has two large seas which look like lakes in some ways. One is the sea of Okhotsk between Kamchatka and Sakhalin and the other is the East Sea<sup>1</sup> between Russia's Maritime Provinces, Japan and Korea. The East Sea, once regarded as the peripheral sea of Asia, is being highlighted as South Korea, North Korea, Japan, China, Russia and Mongolia have different purposes for it. A new sea route is opening for logistics movements from an economic viewpoint. However, history surrounding the East Sea is not that simple.

Different maritime races held their own ground in the East Sea. Exemplary countries are ancient kingdoms of Korea, such as Goguryeo and Balhae. The Kitans and Jurchen built their nations based on Manturia and their kingdoms such as the Liao Dynasty, the Jin Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty faced by the East Sea. Among them, Balhae used the East Sea as an official route for trade with Japan. Balhae's exit to the East Sea was 'the route to Japan.'

Regardless of existence of a nation-state, various races and languages coexisted in Siberia. The Russian Empire broke up such order and principle of coexistence. To be precise, Siberia of today is Siberia of the Russian and 'denied history' which eliminated history of the natives. Siberia was 'forcefully found' by the Empire and regarded as 'the abandoned land' despite resident of various ethnicities. China lost their exit to East sea. China is trying to earn a direct route to the East Sea for its Northeastern provinces as it did 150 years ago.

Throughout history of civilization, the East Sea has held significance in the Far East. However, such significance subsided with the end of the Second World War (1945) and the East Sea became the sea in the edge of the world. But, Now the East Sea is on the route to the Arctic Sea and further to Europe and also a way from Europe to the Arctic Ocean to East Asia. This offers great future and possibilities as a sea route. Significance of this new sea route through the Arctic Ocean is tantamount to traditional exchanges between the East and the West through the Suez Canal. With reference to *the East-West Silk Road* in the past, this new route can be called as '*New Silk Road*.'

**Keywords** Civilization, Northeast Asia, New silk road, East-West Silk Road, East sea, Japan sea

## Why does the East Sea become an issue?

Far East Asia has two large seas which look like lakes in some ways. One is the sea of Okhotsk between Kamchatka and Sakhalin and the other is the East Sea<sup>2</sup> between Russia's Maritime Provinces, Japan and Korea. The Kurils stretch from Kamchatka and Sakhalin blocks the Southeastern part, forming 'sea in the middle of lands' just like a lake. The East Sea is no different. The East is the typical type of 'sea in the middle of lands' with several straits as exits.<sup>3</sup>

The East Sea is gathering international attention. The East Sea, once regarded as the peripheral sea of Asia, is being highlighted as South Korea, North Korea, Japan, China, Russia and Mongolia have different purposes for it. A new sea route is opening for logistics movements from an economic viewpoint. However, history surrounding the East Sea is not that simple. Some countries occupied and used the sea. Russia joined the others belatedly. China lost a way out to the East Sea but is determined to use the sea in some day. Mongolia needs the East Sea as a land-locked nation. In its Southern entry are the Pusan Port of Korea, Niigata and other Ports of Japan. If global warming opens the Arctic routes, the East Sea will enjoy international attention as a new route.

Marine environmental conditions of the East Sea are very interesting. The sea is very close to Sakhalin and main land of Russia. Sakhalin along with Hokkaido is the ground for lots of activities done by the Ainu and the Ulchi. The Kurils, north of Hokkaido, is the base for the Ainu as well as the Inuit and the Itelman who came down from Kamchatka. Situation in Russia's Maritime Provinces north of the East Sea is more complex. Various minorities, such as the Orochi and the Nanai were situated in Russia's Maritime Provinces. The area was also the heart for nations like Balhae, Kitan, the Liao Dynasty, the Jin Dynasty and the Qing dynasty. As such, the East Sea and the sea of Okhotsk were the stage for lots of activities done by different people beyond being the simple sea.<sup>4</sup>

## The East Sea to Manchuria and Japan: its importance in civilization

Different maritime races held their own ground in the East Sea. Exemplary

countries are ancient kingdoms of Korea, such as Goguryeo and Balhae. The Kitans and Jurchen built their nations based on Manturia and their kingdoms such as the Liao Dynasty, the Jin Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty faced by the East Sea. Among them, Balhae used the East Sea as an official route for trade with Japan.

Balhae's exit to the East Sea was 'the route to Japan.' From Yongwonbu (currently, Hunchun in China) envoys of Balhae left for Japan. They went southeast from Yongwonbu to reach Kraskino of the Posyet Bay which was Yumju of Balhae. They took a boat here and sailed southeast cross the East Sea and arrived in Fukui and Ishikawa of Japan. This was a relatively close route between Balhae and Japan. 'The route to Japan' in Yongwonbu linked the Tang Dynasty and Japan as well as Balhae and Japan.

Relationship between Balhae and Japan traces back to August in the 727th year, 30 years after Balhae's foundation. In that year, Balhae firstly dispatched envoys to Japan and started diplomatic relation with Japan. Over the next 200 years (727-919) after sending its first envoys across Hokkaido until it finally collapsed, Balhae had frequent exchanges with Japan. Balhae sent delegations 34 times to Japan and Japan sent its delegations to Balhae 12 times.<sup>5</sup>

The rulers of Balhae tried to maintain its relationship with Japan although the sea route was very tough. The main purpose was economic benefits aside from political gains. They could earn specialties and luxury items of a southern nation, while their counterpart in Japan showed interest in fur products. Delegations of Balhae carried tiger fur, bear fur, ginseng and other specialties and trade them in Bungnyuk, the landing area, or in other inland areas.<sup>6</sup>

The route for trade with Japan was not an easy one. Throughout the Balhae Dynasty, people took the same route. They left from Yongwonbu across the East Sea and arrived in coastal areas of Kaga or Nodo of Japan. Then, they took inland routes to get to Kyoto. Delegations of Balhae took advantage of crossing of warm and cold currents as well as seasonal wind. When they left for Japan, they left in Autumn, took a detour in the east end of the East Sea to reach coastal villages of Japan. When they came back to Balhae, they took a detour in the west of the East Sea this time before arriving in Yongwonbu. All told, the sea route between Balhae and Japan was very precarious. It took long and ships were wrecked sometimes, leaving many dead or drifting in the water. After Balhae collapsed (B.C. 916), exchanges

with Japan ended officially. The East Sea was peripheral in the region in the first place anyway.

Recently, Japan is showing deep interest in developing the East Sea and northern east areas-which were left behind economic development. It wants to use the East Sea as a route to deliver resources from Manchuria of China and Russia. Under the circumstances, reconciliation between North Korea and Japan is expected along with peaceful use of the East Sea. Japan's interest in North part of the East Sea was great when it invaded Manchuria and dispatched troops to Japan. In fact, the industrial complex in the east coast of North Korea was built by Japan as a logistics base for its advancement into Manchuria. The ports in the Northern east coast of Japan lost their roles and remained deteriorated. Recovery signs surrounding the East Sea can be a blessing to northern east region of Japan. If Arctic routes are built passing through the East Sea, that will benefit the East Strait and the Tsuruga Channel.

### **The Biggest Incident in Northeast Asia: Russia enters the East Sea**

Regardless of existence of a nation-state, various races and languages coexisted in Siberia. The Russian Empire broke up such order and principle of coexistence. To be precise, Siberia of today is Siberia of the Russian Empire and 'denied history' which eliminated history of the natives. Siberia was conquered. It was 'forcefully found' by the Empire and regarded as 'the abandoned land' despite resident of various ethnicities.

Is it due to the pre-dominance of the Great Voyage? 'The Conquest into the East' by the White House Empire is relatively less-known. Many are familiar with 'the Era of Great Voyage' by maritime powers, such as Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands and the UK but regard 'the Conquest into the East' as a separate incident. However, 'the Conquest into the East' is one of important shocks which greatly affects the history of civilization. It started from Peterburg to Yakutsk, Khabarovsk and Kamchatka and finally reached Alaska. This was remarkable because Russia became a new player in geopolitics dominated by countless natives, China, Japan and Korea. Russia's entrance heralded start of totally new and different

history in Northeast Asia which maintained long history. The Era of Great Voyage was well organized and aligned concept (although this was done mainly by western scholars) while the Conquest into the East received rather small attention and remained unpolished.

Troops of tsar was led by Cossack and followed by fur traders. The government of Moscow invaded Siberia with Cossack, sending troops in boats in every direction to conquer natives and build fortress. Huntsmen, the plunderers in the wild, and fur traders went after, followed by clerics of Russian Orthodox Church with cross.

Cossack finally reached the Lena River and built the Yakutsk fortress. With Yakutsk as starting point, conquest continued in three directions. One was towards northeast, the Bering Strait while another went towards Kamchatka and east, the way to the Sea of Okhotsk. The other direction was to reach the Amur River (Heilong Jiang).

Europe-Russia continued marching east over the Ural Mountains to reach the Far East and built Asia-Russia. This is the history of colonial management itself. Things were no different after socialist revolution. Its advancement to the east continued throughout the 21st Century. The time passed and it becomes history.

Today is the 21st Century. Resources in the Far Eastern Russia and Siberia are preparing themselves for new version of the Great Voyage. Gas, oil and coal abundant in Far East and Siberia are ready to be sold off to Korea, China and Japan. Zarubino and other ports in the East Sea evolved into large ports, boosted by joint investment with China. As it had deep interest in an ice-free port, Russia rented the Najin Port of North Korea for a long period of time, securing access to the East Sea. Russia has been attentive to the East Sea due to economic and military reasons. Moreover, Russia will leap the largest benefits if Arctic routes open because the routes will go northwards via the East Sea.

Vladivostok in the East Coast acted as a trade port as well as a military port. However, its function as a trade port was taken over by Nakhodka, a newly built port 90km away from Vladivostok. Vladivostok is the largest base for fishing industry in Maritime Province of Siberia, such as whaling ships, floating crab canneries and refrigerator ships. Nakhodka is located east from Vladivostok and is connected to the northern part of the East Sea. It is the last stop of the Siberian

Railway and reaches to Korea, Japan, China, Singapore, Hong Kong and India, acting as the gateway of the Trans-Siberian Railway for international cargoes and passenger ships. Zarubino port is a port city in the Posyet Bay, located 220km away from Vladivostok or 105 km by sea. Close to Hunchun of China, Zarubino port is regarded as the only sea route to link the East Sea and Northeast three provinces of China.

### The Lost Exit to the East Sea: China's efforts to recover one

The border between China and Russia's eastern part was firstly decided according to the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689) with the Argun River, Gorbitsa River, the Stanovoy Range and the sea as boundaries. In the mid-19th Century, the imperial Russia forced the Qing Dynasty to sign unequal treaties such as the Treaty of Aihun (1858) and the Treaty of Peking (1860). As a result, current Primorskiy (Maritime Province) and southern part of Khabarovsk became Russian territories.

These treaties confirmed the eastern border of the two countries as the areas from the Heilong Jiang and the Ussuri River to the Tumen Jiang, which is still valid today. M.I.Venyukov, a scholar and commentator of the imperial Russia once said (1873)<sup>7</sup> about the importance of maritime border provinces, particularly that of southern maritime border provinces from geo-strategical, economic, political and military viewpoints as follows;

*"No other land is more promising than the east border province of the Amur-Tumen River to Russia which has very far exit to the world. Here in east provinces Russia has an open window to the sea Europe cannot offer. Therefore, Russia should join its forces against its enemy which tries to hold world supremacy... These are the only provinces which can secure essential ports for free seaborne trade with sources of long-term wealth, such as the US, the Sunda Islands and India... If Russia should lose some parts of its land, nothing will be sadder than losing these provinces."*

M.I.Venyukov lived in Vladivostok and his view is closer to Russians in the Maritime Province than those in Moscow. He also said;

*"China is paying keen attention to the crossing of borders of Russia, China and North Korea for geological and economic reasons. Intensive economic development of Neimenggu, Heilongjiang and Jilin in Northeast provinces is being limited by transportation. These provinces have no direct access to the sea and rely on Dalian-Harbin railway route which is already saturated with cargo transportation from Northeastern provinces. For this reason, China has tried to secure an exit to the East Sea. If China secures such direct route to the sea, it will generate tremendous economic benefits."*<sup>8</sup>

China is still trying to earn a direct route to the East Sea for its Northeastern provinces as it did 150 years ago. It can secure such direct route by acquiring southernmost territory of Russia close of the Posyet Bay, the Tumen River (through river bed dredging works and construction of a river port with linkage to the Tumen River and the East Sea) or long-term lease of Russian rail bed which connects Hunchun, Kraskino and Zarubino port. The last measure is to be realized by an international consortium for the Tumen Project supported by the UNDP. A different route can be found through the Najin Port in North Korea.

China's direct route to the East Sea will establish a new transportation system by shortening the distance from China to Japan, Korea and its southern part. By doing so, China will be able to accelerate economic development of Northeastern provinces, while Japan will boost relatively retarded economic development of its western areas. In addition, the route is a direct channel for Japan to import cheap raw materials from Northeastern parts of China, which will benefit both.

### Conclusion

Throughout history of civilization, the East Sea has held significance in the Far East. However, such significance subsided with the end of the Second World War (1945) and the East Sea became the sea in the edge of the world. As the Korean peninsula was divided, North Korea's access to the East Sea became impossible. During the Cold War, relations between the Soviet Union, China, Korea and Japan remained frozen too. Big changes occurred when the socialist system broke down. China is seeking an exit to the East Sea with industrialization of its

three Northeastern provinces. Russia is trying to use the East Sea to export its gas and other resources. South Korea and Japan are advancing northward through the East Sea. China needs the East Sea for logistics reasons, to transport resources and products to Northeastern provinces (Manchuria). For that goal, China is expanding the Zarubino Port jointly with Russia and tries to enter the East Sea via the Najin Port of North Korea, the shortest route from Manchuria.

North Korea also has its share of worries and tasks. The key issue is economic difficulties and insufficient infrastructure. This is why it rented the Najin Port to China and Russia for long term. With its efforts for infrastructure development, North Korea will seek logistics movements towards South Korea and Japan through the Najin Port.

On its part, South Korea has remaining tasks. For its linkage to the Eurasia railway, passage through a North Korean railway is a must. However, the division between the two Koreas and political conflicts limit South Korea's use of North Korean railway.<sup>9</sup> Chances are that transportation will be carried out through the East Sea route or the Najin Port will be used in the future.

Meanwhile, Mongolia has limitations as a land-locked nation surrounded by Russia and China. It still has ethnic resistance to China. However, the nation dreams of transporting its resources through the East Sea, checking a possibility of using the Najin Port to go to the East Sea. Recently, Mongolia launched the Maritime and Fisheries Office although it was land-locked.

Climate change and Arctic routes are putting a new light on the East Sea. The sea route through the East Sea is the shortest route to the Arctic Ocean. Climate change is a challenge but also an opportunity to the East Sea. The East Sea is emerging from the periphery of the world system to the center stage as a new trade route.

The East Sea is on the route to the Arctic Sea and further to Europe and also a way from Europe to the Arctic Ocean to East Asia. This offers great future and possibilities as a sea route. Significance of this new sea route through the Arctic Ocean is tantamount to traditional exchanges between the East and the West through the Suez Canal. With reference to *the East-West Silk Road* in the past, this new route can be called as '*New Silk Road*.'

Korea is conducting basic research about the maritime civilization in the

Korean East Sea which reaches to North Korea, Japan, Russia, China and Mongol, etc. and this is being expanded with future vision. Due to thawing of the North Pole due to climate changes, the Ocean shipping route is coming as a future vision for a new shipping route.

## Notes

- 1 Korea and Japan are divided over the naming of 'the East Sea.' Korea has called it 'the East Sea,' while Japan has argued for 'the Japan Sea.' This report consistently uses the term of 'the East Sea.'
- 2 Korea and Japan are divided over the naming of 'the East Sea(東海).' Korea has called it 'the East Sea,' while Japan has argued for 'the Japan Sea(日本海).' This report consistently uses the term of 'the East Sea.'
- 3 The East Sea includes the deep sea going deeper than 3,000m, spanning 300,000km. With the average depth of 1,684m, the East Sea shows very unique marine environment. First, cold current and warm current are met together. The East Korea Warm Current meets the North Korea Cold Current around 40° north latitude, forming wonderful fishing ground. The warm current brings with it squid, while the cold current comes with queen crab. Other major fish stock includes salmon, pollack, herring and cod. On balance, the East Sea can be summarized in the following ways.
  - ① Small-sized (like lake) but deep sea
  - ② Sea surrounded by South Korea, North Korea, Japan, Russia and various minorities
  - ③ Located peripherally despite civilization exchanges in the past
- 4 Joo Kang Hyun, "The History of East Sea Rim Civilization; The Lost Corridor of Civilization", Seoul: Dolbaege, 2015.
- 5 小嶋芳孝, 'Exchanges between Balhae and Japan from an archaeological point of view', *Balhae and Japan in East Asia* Kyungin Publishing, 2008.
- 6 石井正敏, 『日本渤海関係史研究』, 東京: 吉川弘文館, 2001.
- 7 M.I.Venyukov, *East Borders in documents of Russia and China and facts*, trans. Sung Jong-hwan, Vladivostok: Woosuri Publishing, 1999.
- 8 M.I.Venyukov, *East Borders in documents of Russia and China and facts*, trans. Sung Jong-hwan, Vladivostok: Woosuri Publishing, 1999, 309.
- 9 *Maritime Silk Road and Seaport Cities*, Trident Nariman Point Mumbai, India, 16th-17th, Oct, 2014, hosted by Korea Maritime and Ocean University.

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