

# **China-US-Japan Relations and Northeast Asia's Evolving Security Architecture**

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The security architecture in Northeast Asia has been characterized primarily by the US-centric alliance system since the end of the Cold War. The US alliances with Japan and South Korea, the only formal security institutions currently in effect in this subregion, are key components of the broader “hub-and-spokes” security system that the United States has structured across the Asia Pacific region. Recently, however, some multilateral arrangements, most notably the Six-Party Talks, have emerged to tackle the challenges that the traditional bilateral alliances may not be able to meet effectively. Thus the security architecture in Northeast Asia seems to be evolving toward a more diverse and multilayered framework. This paper first reviews the respective US, Japanese, and Chinese perspectives on the existing security architecture; then discusses three major security questions facing Northeast Asia—China's rise, Taiwan, and North Korea—in light of their impacts on the security arrangements in the region; and concludes by offering some policy recommendations on this subject.

## **Perspectives on the Existing Security Architecture**

### *US Views*

For the United States, the alliance-centered strategy has been a success in that it has helped America maintain its regional primacy and achieve its global objectives. The United States also tends to believe that the existing alliance system is a public good that benefits other countries as well by providing peace and stability for the whole region and alleviating antagonism between regional powers, for instance a potential China-Japan rivalry. Therefore, in the US view, reinforcing the existing alliances should remain the core of its security policy toward Northeast Asia. In the meantime, the United States seems to welcome the development of multilateralism, as it has demonstrated in its commitment to the Six-Party Talks, but considers it as merely complementing rather than supplanting the current alliance framework.

A more controversial move in recent American efforts to expand its network of alliances has been the attempt to form a quadrilateral group including the United States, Japan, Australia, and India.<sup>1</sup> This initiative was for a time embraced and enthusiastically promoted by Japan under the Abe administration but received lukewarm responses from Australia and India. Currently, it seems to have lost momentum due to the leadership shifts in Japan, Australia, and the United States. However, the logic behind this kind of initiative, namely a multilateral coalition based on common values like democracy, may not vanish from US strategic thinking.

### *Japanese Views*

In the case of Japan, its active involvement in the war in Afghanistan and the reconstruction of Iraq, and the consequent domestic movement toward constitutional amendments, indicate a new approach in its alliance strategy. Japan, by playing a proactive rather than reluctant role in the US-Japan alliance, has marched significantly forward on its road to becoming a “normal nation,” and at the same time it has effectively met the US demand for reciprocity in a post-9/11 era.<sup>2</sup> The logic underlying Japan’s decision to redefine the alliance, unlike that of the United States, is not global but regional; it is seeking to address the threat from North Korea and the fear of a rising China. In addition to the above-mentioned quadrilateral grouping, Japan once attempted to pursue a so-called “values diplomacy” that aimed to build an “arc of freedom and prosperity,” and it deepened its military relationship with Taiwan, all of which raised serious concerns in China.

There is also a distrust of the reliability of the US-Japan alliance in Japanese political, policy, and intellectual circles. Some Japanese worry that the United States might withdraw its commitment to protecting Japan due to either a decline in its relative power or growing isolationism. They go so far as to suggest that Japan should develop a small nuclear arsenal to counter the potential threat from China.<sup>3</sup> Although a nuclear Japan may seem unrealistic for the foreseeable future, the very emergence of such opinions in Japan’s public discourse still poses serious questions for its neighboring countries as well as for the United States.

Japan’s role in the Six-Party Talks has been seriously hampered by the deadlock on the abduction issue. The deeply rooted mistrust of and aversion to North Korea in the Japanese public has made any immediate breakthrough with North Korea infeasible. Japanese policymakers are further shackled by the ongoing turmoil in national politics. Hence Japan for the moment is unlikely to take the initiative in the multilateral framework.

### *Chinese Views*

China is always wary of US hegemony and the US-Japan alliance and is particularly sensitive to the deployment of the ballistic missile defense system and Japan’s expanding military role. Looking at the Chinese defense white papers published biannually between 1998 and 2006, one finds that the US-Japan alliance was continuously mentioned as a negative, destabilizing, or complicating factor from 1998 to 2006; the ballistic missile defense system was raised as a concern in 2000 and 2004; and Japan’s expanding military role was highlighted as an issue from 2000 to 2006.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, there does exist in China a degree of ambivalence about the US-Japan alliance. Since the normalization of US-China relations in the early 1970s, the United States has been trying to persuade China that the alliance acts as a “cap on the bottle” that can prevent

Japan from growing into a military power. This persuasion seems to have worked to a certain degree so far. Some Chinese analysts recognize the alliance as a constraint on Japan's remilitarization and contend that a sudden collapse of the alliance would cause fundamental changes in the existing security architecture, a situation not necessarily serving China's interests.<sup>5</sup>

The determinant here seems to be Taiwan. Since the United States and Japan redefined their security relationship in the mid-1990s, the question of whether Taiwan is included as a so-called "situation in surrounding areas" has been the most controversial point between China and the US-Japan alliance. When the United States and Japan issued a joint statement in February 2005 after a "2+2" meeting of the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee, explicitly including Taiwan as one of the "common strategic objectives" between the United States and Japan, the Chinese government and media launched another round of criticism of the alliance. Taiwan has thus become China's litmus test of the strategic value of the US-Japan alliance. At the end of 2005, a Chinese analyst published a widely noted essay arguing that the alliance "will act as a propellant of, rather than as a cap on, Japan's military development," and that "as far as China is concerned, the bright side of the US-Japanese alliance seems to be gone."<sup>6</sup> It is also worth noting that in its 2008 defense white paper, China described the US-Japan alliance as one of the "uncertain" factors in the Asia Pacific region.<sup>7</sup> This change toward more neutral wording might be interpreted as partly deriving from the significant easing of tensions across the Taiwan Strait in the past year or so.

Even if we recognize the stabilizing aspect of the US-centric alliance system, the destabilizing aspect of the system and the limitations on its capacity to deal with regional security problems are still undeniable. An alliance is in essence an exclusive arrangement based on a zero-sum-game assumption and a worst-case-scenario calculation. It makes both sides imagine each other as potential enemies. The US-Japan alliance was reinforced in the mid-1990s as a response to the North Korean nuclear crisis and the Taiwan Strait crisis. However, this alliance reinforcement merely strengthened the US stance in a potential crisis; it did nothing to alleviate the tensions, let alone solve the problems. It even exacerbated the security dilemma between China and the US-Japan alliance and deepened China's suspicion over Japan's military role. Above all, it is the Six-Party Talks, not the US-led alliance system, that has been playing a central role in addressing the North Korean nuclear issue.

In contrast to the alliance-centered approach, since 1997 China has been advocating and promoting its "new security concept," which emphasizes dialogue and cooperation among nations. The core of the new concept includes mutual trust, mutual benefit, equity, and coordination.<sup>8</sup> China's commitment to this new concept has been evidenced by its constructive roles in the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Six-Party Talks. Unlike the alliances, these multilateral arrangements are inclusive and do not assume the

existence of an adversary. At the same time, China does not intend to challenge the US-led alliance system since that could only lead to competition rather than cooperation. Thus, from the Chinese point of view, the security architecture in Northeast Asia will evolve through both multilateral and bilateral approaches.

### **China's Rise and Strategic Hedging**

One central question that the current Northeast Asian security architecture must address is how to respond to the rise of China. The various answers to this question, especially for those in the United States, seem to converge at a strategy termed “hedging.” This strategy is believed to combine cooperation and competition, two seemingly contradictory policies, toward China’s rise. The cooperation dimension of the strategy includes promoting economic and military exchanges between the United States and China, encouraging China’s involvement in and contributions to regional and global institutions, and welcoming improved bilateral relations between China and US allies. The competition dimension of the strategy seeks to address the uncertainty about the intentions and capabilities of a rising China by improving the scope and quality of the US-led security framework. The recent enhancement of US security ties with Japan and India, the attempt to form the quadrilateral group, and the improvement of US security relations with Southeast Asian countries are all cases in point.<sup>9</sup>

The first US official document that defined the hedging strategy toward China was the report of the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review. Based on the assumption that the choices made by “countries at strategic crossroads”—a euphemism for China—“will affect the future strategic position and freedom of action of the United States, its allies, and partners,” the report offered the following suggestion: “The United States will attempt to shape these choices in ways that foster cooperation and mutual security interests. At the same time, the United States, its allies and partners must also hedge against the possibility that a major or emerging power could choose a hostile path in the future.”<sup>10</sup> This policy was reaffirmed shortly thereafter by the Bush administration in its second national security strategy, which stated, “Our strategy seeks to encourage China to make the right strategic choices for its people, while we hedge against other possibilities.”<sup>11</sup> The national defense strategy published in 2008 also followed this line of thinking, maintaining that the Defense Department “will respond to China’s expanding military power, and to the uncertainties over how it might be used, through shaping and hedging.”<sup>12</sup>

The hedging strategy seeks to keep a balance between the engagement and integration policy and the dissuasion and deterrence policy, both of which have already unfolded and become well known in the past decade of China-US relations. The fact that the two major schools of US thinking on China policy, the “accommodationalists” and the “confrontationalists,” can both find niches for themselves in this equilibrium accounts for the durability of the hedging strategy.<sup>13</sup>

The US hedging strategy has significant implications for the evolution of the Northeast Asian

security architecture. If the stress is put on the competition side, then the US-led alliances will be enhanced and the security dilemma between this alliance system and China will only deteriorate. If the balance tilts toward the cooperation side, then the United States will be more willing to engage China in various multilateral mechanisms. The hedging strategy can also have a great impact on the China-US-Japan trilateral relationship, since each aspect of the strategy may anchor its Asia policy either on China or Japan. Some US analysts associated the two faces of hedging with two former deputy secretaries of state, Richard Armitage and Robert Zoellick. The Armitage approach emphasized Japan's potential role as a global partner and placed the United States firmly on Japan's side, thereby representing ultimately a skeptical view of China's future role in Asia. In contrast, the Zoellick approach expected China to act as a responsible stakeholder and highlighted shared interests between the United States and China.<sup>14</sup>

Most US analysts believe that the two aspects of the hedging strategy are compatible and complementary and should be integrated into a coherent policy, while at the same time admitting that pursuing such a strategy could encounter difficulties and involve risks in practice. Problems might come from a lack of leadership on US China policy, uncoordinated and mixed messages sent by different parts of the US government, and declining domestic support for the cooperative dimensions of the strategy.<sup>15</sup> Some analysts further pointed out that "hedging is contagious" and could lead to a dangerous arms race as it did during the Cold War.<sup>16</sup>

Japan seems to be pursuing a hedging strategy as well, but Japan hedges in a different way. It engages with China in the economic field and competes with China in the political and military field.<sup>17</sup> Under the Koizumi administration, the Japanese leadership took steps that contributed to a strained China-Japan relationship characterized by "cool politics, warm economics." Shinzo Abe, Koizumi's successor, at one time also advocated a China policy of "separating politics from economics." As part of the quadrilateral grouping efforts, the Abe administration signed a joint declaration on security cooperation with Australia and established a Japan-Australia version of the "2+2" meeting between Japan and the United States.

As a result of the improvement in China-Japan relations during the past several years, China and Japan have revitalized military-to-military exchanges between the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Self-Defense Force (SDF). A historic step was taken by the two countries when mutual port calls were carried out between the Chinese PLA Navy and the Japanese Maritime SDF for the first time since the end of World War II. This was underscored by a joint statement signed in May 2008 by President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, in which the two sides recognized that they "are not threats to each other."

These positive developments notwithstanding, the mistrust between the two countries still persists. After the earthquake in China's Sichuan Province in May 2008, the Japanese government responded promptly by sending the first foreign relief team to China but then decided to substitute chartered commercial planes for Air SDF transport aircraft to carry relief

supplies to the province due to a fear of stirring up Chinese public opinion. When assessing Chinese Minister of Defense Cao Gangchuan's visit to Japan in 2007, the first trip of its kind in more than nine years, the *East Asian Strategic Review*, an annual publication of the Japanese National Institute for Defense Studies, concluded that Cao "did not satisfactorily address" Japanese concerns regarding China's increased defense budget, that his trip "largely failed to advance basic mutual understanding, trust, and friendship as envisioned by Japan," and that "China may likely exploit this superficial exchange as a tool for advertising itself as a peaceful state."<sup>18</sup> Although the views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent the official position of the Japanese government or the Ministry of Defense, they still reflect Japan's deep distrust of China. In fact, in April 2008, the Japanese government reportedly decided to undertake a drastic revision of the National Defense Program Guidelines in response to China's military buildup.<sup>19</sup>

It seems that Japan holds a different view from that of the United States regarding Chinese military modernization and the effectiveness of military-to-military exchanges with China. The United States views China's military modernization as reasonable and far from challenging US military dominance; it sees military-to-military exchanges as an instrument not only of engagement in the responsible stakeholder framework but also of hedging in that it can help to avoid miscalculations in a crisis situation.<sup>20</sup> Japan is understandably more suspicious due to China's geographic proximity and its complex feelings about China's rise. The history issue also exacerbates distrust between the two countries. Other possible causes of the relative sluggishness in Japan's military exchanges with China include the frequent changes of defense ministers due to Japan's domestic political turmoil and the inward-looking orientation of the Japanese defense establishment, which tends to see the exchanges merely as an administrative burden with little impact.<sup>21</sup>

But Japan is also closely watching US military exchanges with China and fears that it might be left behind if ties between the other two keep progressing.<sup>22</sup> In early 2009, momentum was restored to China-Japan exchanges through a visit to Japan by the deputy chief of general staff of the PLA and a visit by Japan's defense minister to China. During the latter visit, the two sides released a press communiqué confirming 10 points of defense exchange, which included continuing mutual visits and dialogues at various levels, holding defense and security consultations in Tokyo within the year, discussing the establishment of a maritime liaison mechanism, exchanging views on international peacekeeping operations, coping with natural disasters, and cracking down on piracy.<sup>23</sup>

### **Chinese Strategic Visions**

Some US analysts also use the term "hedging" to describe China's security policy, which includes its multilateral and bilateral diplomacy in Asia, its cooperation with Russia, and its own

military modernization programs.<sup>24</sup> But from the Chinese perspective, these policies are merely defensive responses to the potential of US containment or encirclement of China, as well as a continuation of China's traditional good-neighbor diplomacy. After all, China does not seek any formal bilateral or multilateral alliances as the United States has done in the region.

Chinese analyses of the hedging strategy are mostly negative. Although the concept of hedging may seem a neutral one for the Americans, many Chinese see it as merely a continuation of the concept of strategic competition. When the United States strengthened its alliances and security partnerships with Japan, Australia, India, and the ASEAN countries, or promoted such notions as a "league of democracies," and when Japan advocated building an "arc of freedom and prosperity," the Chinese intuitively felt as if they were being encircled. Although some Chinese analysts may recognize that the US security network in the Asia Pacific region is not solely targeted at China, they still argue that it at least harbors the intention of guarding against China.<sup>25</sup>

In the eyes of some Chinese analysts, the hidden assumption of the hedging strategy remains that China is a potential rival, an assumption that could become a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading to a security dilemma and an arms race. The factors that they believe contribute to the adoption of such a strategy include the structural tension between China as a rising power and the United States as an existing power, the different interests and positions of the two countries on the Taiwan issue, the influence of neoconservatism and offensive realism in the United States, and the demands of interest groups close to the defense industry.<sup>26</sup> There is even concern in China that hedging implies a containment policy.<sup>27</sup>

That being said, the Chinese people are not preoccupied with the fear of being encircled or hedged against. The above-mentioned new security concept and China's active involvement in regional multilateral institutions are initiatives that China originally took to counter the "China threat theory" but later integrated into its foreign and security strategies.<sup>28</sup>

China attaches special importance to stable relations with the countries that surround it. A case in point is China's successful negotiations of territorial disputes with most of its neighboring countries. Although disputes over the South China Sea and East China Sea remain difficult to tackle, and some recent events in the two areas may have temporarily raised the level of tension, China still clearly insists that these problems be solved through peaceful means. The Chinese government has also been taking pains to prevent these negotiations from being influenced by public opinion.

China also searches for stability in its relations with the major world powers, characterizing them basically as "strategic partnerships." Being aware of the dual effect of the hedging strategy, some Chinese analysts still argue that the shift from being deemed a potential rival to a stakeholder marks significant progress in China's relationship with the United States, and that the so-called "neither enemy nor friend" relationship, though not ideal, is a relatively realistic

and acceptable relationship for both countries under the current circumstances and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.<sup>29</sup> There seems to be a consensus among Chinese scholars that the existing international system of “one superpower and several big powers” (*yichao duoqiang*) will remain unchanged in the coming decades and that this system has not impeded China’s development up to the present, nor will it do so in the future. In this light, China should recognize the status of the United States as a superpower, as well as its interests and role in the Asia Pacific region; the United States should also recognize China’s interests and role in the existing international system, as well as its need for development and stability.<sup>30</sup>

In the meantime, there do exist in China pessimistic views on China’s relations with other major powers, which contend that “strategic partnership” is no more than a euphemism for “neither enemy nor friend” and that any enemy can be called a strategic partner as long as it is not engaged in an all-out confrontation with China. From this perspective, the major powers will simply compete in the name of cooperation, resulting in less trust and less stability in their relations with each other.<sup>31</sup> More moderate analysts may acknowledge that interdependence and cooperation are still the mainstream of the relations among major powers, but they are wary of the return of traditional realism. Some are particularly concerned about the so-called “hidden agenda” behind the war on terrorism, which means that the United States, by sharpening its weapons and strengthening its alliances, is altering its threat perception and refocusing on some major powers, despite the fact that antiterrorism remains on top of the agenda in all US official documents.<sup>32</sup>

Chinese analysts are also debating where the main sources of threats to China come from. Some argue that while China has traditionally linked external threats directly to internal stability, this linkage between external and internal security has been declining over the past three decades. This argument assumes that, as a result of the rapid growth of China’s national strength, foreign influence upon China’s domestic politics has gradually waned and that forces promoting independence in Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang are unlikely to achieve their goals. Therefore, when the Chinese people no longer face the danger of the ruin of their country or the overthrow of their government, they will be able to take greater account of external threats and factors when developing their international strategies.<sup>33</sup> Other scholars may share the view that China’s domestic stability has become less susceptible to external threats but point out that China’s three decades of reform and development have also created many difficult problems that could undermine domestic political stability. In this view, China’s grand strategy should be different from that of the United States in the sense that the internal threats China faces are still larger than the external ones.<sup>34</sup>

The extremely complicated situation in China today offers no easy answer to this debate. One recent example is the difficulty in assessing the extent to which the violence in Lhasa in March 2008 and in Urumchi in July 2009 affects the national security of China. The resurgence of an



old theme in China's strategic debate, namely that of reorienting toward the western interior regions, shows that problems such as regional disparities in economic development, ethnic and religious conflicts, and relations between the central and local governments are likely to pose new threats to China's stability in its next stage of development.<sup>35</sup>

Regardless of the various arguments in China's strategic debate, the Chinese leadership has on many occasions elaborated on China's strategic choice to pursue peaceful development, sending a clear message to the people at home and abroad. As Hu Jintao's report to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China clearly stated, "Historic changes have occurred in the relations between contemporary China and the rest of the world, resulting in ever closer interconnection between China's future and destiny and those of the world."<sup>36</sup> It seems apparent that cooperation and harmony will remain the theme of Chinese diplomacy. As one Chinese official put it, on the one hand, China must acknowledge that its self-definition as a developing country can hardly be endorsed by other countries and that the international community is increasingly expecting China to shoulder greater responsibility, while on the other hand, the Chinese people must also be clear that their own country's strength and influence have not changed fundamentally and that the heated discussion on China's rise only reflects the growing gap between the perceptions and realities of China's power. Therefore, China should continue to pursue a prudent foreign policy.<sup>37</sup>

### **Taiwan and North Korea: Opportunities and Challenges**

The Taiwan issue and the North Korean nuclear issue are both challenges to and opportunities for the evolution of the security architecture in Northeast Asia. The situation across the Taiwan Strait has shown significant progress since the Kuomintang took power in Taiwan in May 2008, while the recent developments surrounding North Korea indicate that the road ahead will continue to be filled with twists and turns.

#### *Taiwan*

China and the United States can be generally satisfied with each other regarding their coordination on the Taiwan issue. The US efforts to moderate the independence movement in Taiwan proved to be partly effective and were appreciated by the Chinese side. The strategic basis of this coordination lies in the "one China" framework and the "status quo" consensus maintained by both sides. Although China and the United States still differ greatly on issues such as Taiwan's political position and the ultimate solution of this issue, the two sides have at least acknowledged the unbearable risks that a drastic change in the "one China" policy or the "status quo" could entail. The lessons that China and the United States have learned in the past are conducive to parallel management of potential Taiwan Strait crises in the future. This proves that

the strategic dialogue and defense exchanges between the two countries have produced positive results and that the security dilemma posed by the case of Taiwan is manageable to a certain extent.<sup>38</sup>

It should also be noted that the United States is not shifting its policy on the Taiwan issue, which can be understood as a dual balance approach. In cross-strait relations, the United States maintains a balance between the mainland and Taiwan, and in the internal politics of Taiwan, it also wants to keep a balance between the pro-independence pan-green camp and the more conservative pan-blue camp. Such a dual balance allows the United States to exert greater influence on both the mainland and Taiwan. From the Chinese perspective, this US strategic ambiguity is not enough to prevent the independence forces from moving in a dangerous direction. Mixed messages from the United States might encourage adventurism by the Taiwan independence forces, which could spur a new crisis in the future. And in the short and medium terms, tenacious problems such as US arms sales to Taiwan, a possible upgrading of the US-Taiwan relationship, and the international role of Taiwan will keep haunting China-US relations and regional security. Moreover, there is a lingering wariness in China that accepting the status quo could perpetuate the separation of Taiwan from the mainland.

These differences, however, should not become reasons for competition between China and the United States. On the contrary, the two sides should continue their strategic dialogue to ameliorate the security dilemma, alleviate mutual misapprehension, and avoid spirals of tension over the Taiwan Strait. The two sides should also seize the current opportunity to institutionalize bilateral coordination in coping with the Taiwan issue.

Japan's involvement in Taiwan has deepened in the past decade. As mentioned above, by introducing the concept of the "situation in surrounding areas" into its security agreement with the United States, Japan has committed itself to providing rear area support to the United States in a conflict scenario involving the Taiwan Strait. Although the Japanese government often reiterates its official policy of "one China," the relationship between Japan and Taiwan, especially in the military field, has always been a serious concern to China. This relationship includes dispatching high-ranking retired officers or officers in active service as representatives and military attachés, conducting high-level military dialogue, and cooperating covertly in military exercises and intelligence sharing. Although the military relationship between Japan and Taiwan will not match that between the United States and Taiwan for the foreseeable future, some Chinese observers still caution that a US-Japan-Taiwan quasi-alliance is stealthily being built.<sup>39</sup> The defense cooperation between Japan and Taiwan is also viewed in China as one of the main obstacles to enhancing China-Japan military mutual trust.<sup>40</sup>

Fears of a reunified China dominating Asia, sympathies for Taiwan among the public, and the influence of an anti-China and pro-Taiwan independence force in Japan's domestic politics underlie the Japanese government's reluctance to clarify its position on this issue. However,

Japanese policymakers and analysts should rethink their Taiwan policies in light of the recent overall improvement in China-Japan and China-US relations. An encouraging step in this direction was Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda's statement concerning the Taiwan issue during his visit to China in December 2007. In his talks with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, Fukuda said that Japan would give no support to the claims of "two Chinas"; "one China, one Taiwan"; or "Taiwan independence" or to Taiwanese authorities' attempts to join the United Nations and to seek UN membership through a referendum. Compared with the US statement that called the planned referendum provocative and said that the United States would oppose it, Japan's "no support" stance could perhaps be regarded as not being straightforward enough and falling short of China's expectations.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the Japanese statement of these "four nos" was publicly appreciated by the Chinese government as "complete and clear." Chinese scholars also acknowledged that Japan had taken an appropriate step forward, which would facilitate the continuing development and improvement of China-Japan relations.<sup>42</sup> With the anti-Chinese and pro-Taiwan independence elements in Japan losing momentum for the time being, Japan should be able to regain its composure and acknowledge that the major threat to regional security is not the rise of China but the adventurism in Taiwan and thus restrain itself from sending the wrong messages to Taiwan independence forces in the future.

The Taiwan authority is currently proposing an Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement with the mainland. Beijing has responded with a very positive attitude and has stressed that this issue should not be politicized. With the leaderships in both Taipei and Beijing being pragmatic and focusing on the economic rather than the political aspects of their relationship, the three governments of China, the United States, and Japan can expect more stability across the Taiwan Strait. By carefully coordinating with Beijing, Washington and Tokyo will be able to manage their relations with Taipei without irritating the mainland. It therefore becomes possible to play a positive-sum game over the Taiwan issue. Needless to say, it is ultimately the Chinese people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait who must find a solution by themselves. A favorable external environment, however, is also indispensable. In addition to institutionalizing China-US bilateral coordination, the three governments should seek ways to establish a trilateral dialogue in order to further reduce the risks involved in coping with future uncertainties in Taiwan.

### *North Korea*

The central questions of the North Korean nuclear issue are whether and how the goal of denuclearization can be achieved. For the United States, the threat is not the nuclear weapons allegedly possessed by North Korea but possible nuclear proliferation by North Korea. Should the United States compromise on its goal of denuclearization as it did in the Indian nuclear case, China and Japan would find themselves in serious straits. Up until now, US officials in charge of

the negotiations have repeatedly clarified that the goal is complete denuclearization, not just the declaration of existing nuclear programs, and that the Six-Party Talks will not stop halfway. But suspicions remain since they admit at the same time that the process will be extraordinarily difficult and cannot be completed in one phase. This incrementalist approach to denuclearization faces criticism at home and abroad. Conservatives in the United States do not believe that North Korea will ever make concessions, and they tend to exaggerate the maneuvering power of North Korea. Liberals, for their part, are also loath to make deals with the regime in Pyongyang.<sup>43</sup>

Meanwhile, in Japan, some conservative politicians have been blaming the Six-Party Talks for the failure to prevent North Korea from going nuclear and for not effectively addressing the abduction issue. They attribute these failures to the lack of consensus among the other five countries involved in the talks, which North Korea can exploit. But the Japanese government recognizes the validity of the Six-Party framework and is likely to shift gradually to a more pragmatic policy toward North Korea. One difficulty, however, is that without some progress on the abduction issue, the Japanese public will not allow their government to give economic or energy assistance to North Korea, which may undermine multilateral initiatives that should include Japan.

China's position on the issue is twofold: denuclearization and stability. Although North Korea's nuclear weapons may not pose a direct threat to China, a nuclear-armed North Korea still causes grave concern for Beijing since it could trigger a chain effect in the region with South Korea, Japan, and even Taiwan pursuing their own nuclear capabilities—the scenario China would least like to see. In fact, China's security interests have already been compromised as a result of this issue. In the past few years, in response to North Korea's missile tests and its nuclear tests, the United States and Japan have accelerated their joint research and deployment of a ballistic missile defense system, a move that has the potential to neutralize China's deterrent capability and weaken China's leverage over the Taiwan issue. In the meantime, any kind of non-peaceful solution to the issue is also not in China's interest, because this might create a refugee crisis and other problems that could destabilize the Chinese provinces bordering North Korea. Hence, China will continue its effort to promote the Six-Party process and develop it into a multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia.

It should be noted, however, that simultaneously attaining the twin objectives of denuclearization and stability is no easy task. There is a view in China that the two objectives may not be compatible because North Korea has never truly intended to give up its nuclear weapons. According to this argument, the Six-Party Talks may not be the sole option and the issue of North Korea should not be allowed to drag on indefinitely.<sup>44</sup> In spite of their different priorities, China, the United States, and Japan share a common interest in the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as well as a common recognition of the Six-Party process as an appropriate framework for addressing this complex issue. If the emphasis is placed on moving

ahead peacefully from one phase to the next rather than on forcing North Korea to give up its nuclear programs once and for all, the three countries should be able to sustain their cooperation in this multilateral process.

### **From Bilateral Coordination to Trilateral Strategic Dialogue**

The security architecture in Northeast Asia may evolve to include three types of security arrangements—bilateralism, trilateralism, and multilateralism. Bilateralism is likely to remain the point of departure for security cooperation; trilateralism is a goal to be pursued in the near and medium-term future; and multilateralism should, in the long run, lay the foundation for a new security architecture. It is the problems facing the countries in the region—not the power distribution among them—that require such a multilayered, parallel evolution of regional security frameworks.

In a post-Cold War and post-9/11 era, security threats may come not from any particular country but from problems on which countries lack communication and coordination. Both the United States and Japan have realized in recent years that the rise of China is not necessarily a threat but possibly an opportunity. Although the hedging strategy still denotes some insecurity and wariness on the parts of the United States and Japan in terms of their perceptions of China, the positive course of their recent relations with China demonstrates that there has been significant progress in various types of bilateral coordination. As mentioned above, the coordination between China and the United States over the Taiwan issue did not challenge the security interests of any party involved. In fact, it benefited all parties. Here, the key to success lies in a problem-driven rather than power-centric approach to security affairs. If emphasis were to be put on power competition with China, the United States and Japan would naturally view Taiwan as a military asset to counterbalance China's geopolitical influence, which could only be detrimental for their relations with China as well as for stability across the region.

It is true that the US-Japan alliance may still create difficulties for China as long as it remains central to the competition aspect of the hedging strategy. But if stable bilateral relations between China on the one hand and the United States and Japan on the other can be consolidated and further developed, the negative ramifications of the alliance will be limited. Recent incidents such as the China-US spat in the South China Sea in March 2009 and the December 2008 China-Japan encounter near the Diaoyu [Senkaku] Islands could serve as justification for the reinforcement of the US-Japan alliance if they are viewed through a power-centric prism. But these events could also be seen as opportunities to develop more effective communication and preventive measures in order to avoid the further escalation of tensions. Admittedly, the current lack of confidence between China and both Japan and the United States is reflected in the state of the bilateral military-to-military exchanges and security dialogues underway. But it is for this very reason that confidence-building measures should be pursued through further military

consultation and cooperation.<sup>45</sup>

Without bilateral coordination, any trilateral or multilateral mechanism will be infeasible. However, bilateral coordination itself can also cause problems because this will inevitably arouse the suspicions of third parties. Historically, China has been worried about the US-Japan alliance, while Japan has been worried about a US-China strategic partnership. Whenever Washington joins hands with Beijing without consulting Tokyo, the Japanese people experience a bitter sense of being “bypassed” or even “betrayed” by their American ally. The perceived rise of China’s standing in US policy toward Asia has recently become a serious concern in Japan, and this drove the Japanese government to lobby strongly for Japan be the initial stop on Hillary Clinton’s first overseas trip as secretary of state and for Prime Minister Taro Aso to be the first foreign leader hosted by President Barack Obama. Although the message from the US side seems to be that the US-Japan and US-China relationships are not zero-sum, the Japanese remain uneasy.<sup>46</sup>

It is against this backdrop that Beijing, Washington, and Tokyo should commence a trilateral strategic dialogue to dispel the skepticism and reduce the uncertainty among them. In fact, not only are policy analysts in all three countries actively promoting the idea of a trilateral strategic dialogue, either in the form of meetings among senior officials or summits,<sup>47</sup> but the three governments are also starting to incorporate this idea into their diplomatic agenda. It is reported that the first official trilateral talks among China, the United States, and Japan were scheduled for Washington DC in late July 2009 but these were later shelved for fear of unnecessarily angering North Korea. The plans were for this trilateral meeting to be chaired by the director general of the Department of Policy Planning from China’s foreign ministry, the US State Department’s director of policy planning, and the deputy vice-minister for foreign policy from Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The topics would include the overall Asian situation and global issues such as the financial crisis, climate change, and energy.<sup>48</sup>

The scheduling and subsequent postponement of the talks point to both the imperatives and obstacles in implementing trilateralism in the region. It can be said that the easing of tension across the Taiwan Strait has partly removed one of the major obstacles toward establishing a trilateral dialogue but that the escalation of the North Korea situation has forced policymakers to be cautious in launching such a dialogue. Even if the North Korea nuclear issue per se were not to be included in the planned talks, the very emergence of such a trilateral meeting at a delicate time would be widely viewed as further isolating Pyongyang. This could be counterproductive to the goal of alleviating tensions with North Korea. In the meantime, hardliners in US and Japanese domestic politics are gaining ground due to North Korea’s recent nuclear and missile tests, creating a situation that could encourage a divergence rather than a convergence of opinions among China, the United States, and Japan. Therefore, apart from the improvement of bilateral relations between the three countries, another precondition for holding trilateral talks is

the de-escalation of regional tensions.

It might be wise to start such trilateral discussions with a focus on less sensitive issues such as the global economic slowdown, climate change, and energy. These global issues undoubtedly top the list of common concerns for the three countries. Moreover, enhancing policy coordination among the world's three largest economies on these issues will serve the interests of other countries as well. This being said, global issues may only be the starting point not the long-term focus of trilateral dialogue, because addressing global economic and environmental issues requires the involvement of a wider range of countries, such as the G20 countries.

Hence, in the long term trilateral dialogue should focus on hard security issues, especially those relating to China's military modernization and the US-Japan alliance. Through trilateral interaction, China should aim to convince the United States and Japan that its military modernization has an inherent rationale and is not necessarily targeted at Taiwan. Meanwhile the United States and Japan should explain to China that their newly advanced military cooperation in the counterterrorism campaign will not be used to contain China. Enhancing military transparency, thus, might be one of the major aims of such a dialogue. To achieve this goal, it is advisable that the confidence-building measures currently being discussed and developed through bilateral military-to-military exchanges be expanded to the trilateral level and that the three sides conduct studies of joint crisis management. One point that should be made, though, is that any steps aimed at promoting military transparency must be symmetrical and balanced, meaning that China's efforts in this respect must be reciprocated by the United States and Japan with corresponding measures.

Given the sensitivity of the Taiwan issue and the North Korean nuclear issue, it might be prudent not to explicitly include these as topics in the trilateral dialogue. After all, these two issues are, by their nature, the internal affairs of the Chinese people and Korean people respectively. In any case, China will not allow the trilateral talks to directly discuss Taiwan, nor will North or South Korea allow the talks to discuss North Korea's nuclear capacity. However, if military transparency and mutual trust can be advanced through trilateral dialogue, the risks of miscommunication and miscalculation will be reduced. This would allow some sort of parallel management or coordination, though not direct discussion and cooperation, to be nurtured among the three countries with regard to their policies on Taiwan and North Korea.

As for the form of the trilateral strategic dialogue, the proposed director general-level talks among ministries of foreign affairs could serve as a preparatory and necessary step toward regular higher-level talks (ministerial or vice ministerial level). Since hard security issues should be the focus of this dialogue in the long run, it would be necessary to involve defense ministry officials as well. Officials from ministries related to nontraditional security issues such as finance, the environment, and energy can also be participants if the three governments deem that necessary. But the scope of the dialogue should not be expanded so much as to obscure its main

purpose. Accordingly, foreign ministries alone or together with defense ministries should be the lead agencies in this dialogue.

We have known that the foreign ministries of the three countries are all interested in launching a trilateral dialogue. However, a deep attachment to the alliance with the United States and dissatisfaction with China's lack of military transparency seem to be restraining people in the Japanese defense establishment from endorsing this proposal.<sup>49</sup> This probably explains why the defense ministries did not take part in the preparations for the postponed trilateral talks. The fundamental questions, however, are whether Japan can or is willing to play an independent strategic or security role in the way that China and the United States do and whether China and the United States are ready to see Japan play such a role.<sup>50</sup>

Also, North and South Korea may oppose such trilateral security coordination.<sup>51</sup> Neither North nor South Korea will endorse the concept or practice of a "concert of powers" in Northeast Asia. Therefore, Beijing, Washington, and Tokyo should define their coordination by the problems that such coordination will tackle, not by the powers of its participants. In addition, it should be made clear that trilateral coordination will only take the form of a dialogue and will not supplant the role of existing bilateral alliances. Thus, Japan need not worry about the decline of its position vis-à-vis China.

Meanwhile, both the United States and China have expressed positive attitudes regarding the creation of a multilateral peace and security mechanism. Japan, however, may have some reservations, fearing that a multilateral framework would enhance China's relative power and weaken the US-Japan alliance. Countries outside Northeast Asia, like Canada and Australia, have also shown interest in participating in such a framework. One difficulty is that each country has certain issues that it does not want to include in such a discussion. For China, it might be Taiwan; for Japan and Russia, it might be territorial disputes. Although a future multilateral peace and security mechanism may not grow out of the Six-Party Talks, the Six-Party process does help to cultivate a habit of multilateralism among the relevant countries. Nonetheless, in light of the vicissitudes that the process has experienced, it is premature at the current stage to discuss building a new multilateral security architecture in Northeast Asia.

Therefore, a more realistic option at present is to pursue the establishment of a trilateral strategic dialogue on the basis of enhanced bilateral coordination. For the first time since the end of the Cold War the three bilateral relationships between China, the United States, and Japan are all in fine shape. This provides a historic opportunity for the three countries to jointly explore the possibilities of building a new type of trilateral relations. Regularizing and institutionalizing trilateral strategic dialogue will be an important step leading to improved trilateral relations characterized by confidence and cooperation. And, in the future, this trilateral process will certainly add momentum to the trend toward multilateral security cooperation.



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