

# CHINA- JAPAN-U.S: MANAGING THE TRI-LATERAL RELATIONSHIP

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## Abstract

*Since the end of the Cold War, Asia Pacific region has witnessed many changes in line with changed international political environment. Economic growth of China is a matter of concern for Japan, while China has always remained wary of strong U.S. – Japan Security relations. The uncertainty continues on Korean Peninsula and Taiwan issue remains unsolved. These factors have further challenged the tri-lateral relationship. This article is an attempt to comprehend the emerging state of affairs among China – Japan and U.S. and offers insights regarding their future course.*

## China Factor in Japan – U.S. Relations

From the late nineteenth century until 1945, Japan and the U.S. adopted fundamentally different approaches toward China. After the Second World War, China became more a source of co-operation between the U.S. and Japan as both countries developed their China policies to contain the threat of Soviet expansionism. Then in 1970 Japan was shocked to learn of President Nixon's sudden and secret reversal of U.S. policy toward China. But Japan adjusted quickly to the new reality and moved to normalize its own relations with China meanwhile establishing close contact with the U.S. to develop a strategic triangle with China to counter Soviet expansion. Following the American lead, Japan now incorporated China into the

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developing conception of regional security and China reciprocated. Instead of viewing each other vaguely as potential enemies and members of two hostile camps, China and Japan would in essence become part of what Henry Kissinger called "the new structure of peace."<sup>1</sup>

In a sense the U.S. served as a bridge between China and Japan, since it enabled both to adjust themselves in the emerging new framework of Asia Pacific affairs. However, the long period of cooperation took place in the context of great asymmetry in the U.S. and Japanese power. Now that there is no longer an imminent Russian threat and Japan no longer sees the U.S. as it did in the earlier years, the challenges to cooperation are much more difficult.

From June 1989, until late 1993, the Japanese and American government policies toward China diverged somewhat. The U.S. government tended to be confrontational in its approach toward China, issuing demands and imposing conditions. It sought to alter Chinese external and internal behaviour in the areas of weapons proliferation, human rights and trade. Following the military suppression of popular demonstrations in Beijing on June 4, 1989, the U.S. ceased having extensive, regular high-level dialogue with Chinese leaders.<sup>2</sup>

However, Chinese exports to the U.S. continued to skyrocket, and American interest in investing in China reached new heights. The Japanese approach was non confrontational and muted, typical of its preferred low posture in the conduct of its diplomacy.<sup>3</sup> Regular high level contact was resumed after a decent interval following the June 4, 1989 tragedy. And the Japanese government was at the forefront in restoring development assistance in the months following it.<sup>4</sup>

The difference between Tokyo and Washington on the China policy were however, kept within manageable proportions and both

consulted each other frequently on China policy. In the early 1990s, however, the U.S. government initiated a significant effort to reverse the downward spiral in her relations with Beijing. Without altering the basic American stance on the substantive issues at stake, i.e., security issues, trade and human rights, the Clinton administration signaled a willingness to engage in a renewed, broad-based dialogue with Beijing, including a resumption of military contacts that had been suspended in 1989.

For now, American policy toward China no longer diverged sharply from that of Japan. And the one reason for change was the increasing concern in both Tokyo and Washington, as well as in Seoul, of the dangers posed by North Korea's attempts to make nuclear weapons.

### **Sino-Japanese Relations**

With the break-up of the Soviet Union, the U.S. has become the only superpower of the world, China and Japan have also emerged as major East Asian regional powers in their own right. The dollar value of two-way trade between Japan and China topped \$100 billion for the first time in 2002.<sup>5</sup> Japan's total imports from China also exceeded those from the U.S. for the first time since the Second World War, making China, Japan's largest importing partner.<sup>6</sup> The total value of Japan-China trade increased to about \$132.4 billion in 2003, up 30.4 percentage points and setting a record high for the fifth consecutive year.<sup>7</sup> Political and diplomatic relations between the two are also improving gradually and there are no serious differences except over historical issues and Yasakuni Shrine visits. The credit for the obvious improvement in Sino-Japanese relations goes to China. First, as a corollary of economic development, which China has assigned as its top priority, relations with Japan have taken on a growing importance. Second, since the establishment of the Bush government in the U.S. the strategic environment for China has become increasingly bleak.<sup>8</sup>

In April, 2002, Japanese Prime Minister visited the Republic of China to attend the annual conference of Boao Forum, which was aimed at providing a chance to exchange views among participating countries. On that occasion Prime Minister Koizumi said that “enhanced mutual and complementary relations between Japan and China would contribute to building a cooperative structure in Asia, including the members of the Association of South East Asian Nations.”<sup>9</sup>

In a meeting with his Chinese counter part Premier Zhu Rongji, the two leaders agreed to establish a framework for comprehensive economic consultation in order to avoid trade friction<sup>10</sup>. The close Sino-Japanese economic ties are obviously designed to augment an orderly and cooperative relationship. But beneath this mask is an underlying reality of deep distrust of each other’s intensions and ambitions. China’s historically rooted distrust of Japan stemmed from Japanese aggression in the 1930s and the 1940s and on Japanese side, fears over China’s growing economic strength, despite Prime Minister Koizumi’s denial that “Japan considers China as an economic threat”<sup>11</sup> are the factors that one cannot afford to ignore.

### **Sino – U.S. Relations**

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, U.S.-China, ties have improved in the short run, however both sides continue to perceive each other as a potential threat. It was a real success for Neo-conservatives in President George W. Bush’s administration, when China specialist and Princeton University Professor Aaron Friedberg was appointed as deputy national security advisor and director of policy planning in vice president Cheney’s foreign policy staff. After his appointment, an Asia specialist at New York University Mr John Gershman said: “He is a China-threat person without being hysterical about it, but his appointment is a clear sign that the cooperation that has emerged between the U.S. and China on the

war on terrorism and North Korea is entirely tactical and that Cheney is still inclined to see China as a strategic competitor.”<sup>12</sup>

On various occasions Friedberg has been portraying China as a “strategic competitor,” to the U.S. that will almost inevitably challenge Washington’s own political and military pre eminence in the region.<sup>13</sup> He was also very much concerned about China’s economic power and believed China will use it as a tool to enhance its influence in the region as part of its strategic competition.<sup>14</sup>

In an article “The struggle for Mastery in Asia”, published in neo-conservative monthly *Commentary*, he said: “over the course of the next several decades there is a good chance that the U.S. will find itself engaged in an open and intense geo-political rivalry with the People’s Republic of China (PRC).”<sup>15</sup>

U.S. has also been convincing Taiwan to purchase weapons specially its most advance anti-missile system, the patriot 3 which might provoke China.<sup>16</sup> Since the Bush administration characterized China as a “strategic competitor”,<sup>17</sup> Chinese leaders realized that there is a limit to how far relations with the U.S. can improve. When viewed from a Chinese perspective, since prospects for a fundamental improvement in its relations with the U.S. are small, China seeks to make up for this by strengthening its relations with Japan.

### **China’s Attitude toward North Korean Nuclear Issue**

Compared with the attitude China had taken toward the nuclear crisis in 1994, its positive attitude is prominent this time around. In 1994, China took a very cautious approach to cooperating with the U.S. It was China which opposed the U.S. move to impose economic sanctions on North Korea. This time when North Korea’s nuclear weapons development Programme came to light, China promptly expressed its support for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Thus, it was in February 2003, that China toughened its

attitude toward North Korea. It was reported that China had suspended oil shipments to North Korea for about three days in February or March.<sup>18</sup> Foreign policy circles in the U.S. felt that China was sending a warning to North Korea not to conduct test launches of surface-to-ship missiles into the sea of Japan.<sup>19</sup> In testimony before a Senate Committee on September 11, 2003, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific affairs, James Kelly said: that the pressure applied by China through its suspension of oil shipments led to the holding of the three party talks in April and six party talks in August.<sup>20</sup> There are several reasons why China has taken a more positive stance on the nuclear issue than it did in 1994. First China is more firmly committed to pushing economic development than it was in 1994. Second, China is more serious about avoiding any conflict on the Korean Peninsula that could slowdown the forward momentum of its economy.

Seen in a broader context, China has actively played its role as a mediator in North Korean nuclear crisis. "Beijing's efforts to promote peace and stability in East Asia are also in China's own interests" says Shenjiru, a non-proliferation and arms control expert associated with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.<sup>21</sup> China has become wary of North Korea's adventurism and fears the hard-line policy of the U.S. In essence, it was a test that presented China with the choice of maintaining friendly relations with North Korea or making positive efforts to develop cooperative relations with both Japan and the U.S. and contribute toward the stability of the Asia Pacific region.

### **China, Japan and U.S. in New Security Situation**

On 19th February 2005, the U.S. and Japanese officials announced an understanding according to which the security in the area around Taiwan was for the first time included as a "common strategic objective."<sup>22</sup>For many in the U.S. this was a new component in the Japan-U.S. security relations which developed after the Second

## World War.

The joint statement also showed concern over China's move to modernize its military and Beijing was desired to be transparent in its military planning and weapons procurement.<sup>23</sup> Japan while Redrafting the 1996 joint declaration on bilateral security, clearly said that "It would work together with Washington for the peaceful resolution of issue concerning the Taiwan Strait and pledged to encourage China to improve transparency of its military affairs."<sup>24</sup>

China has been declaring Taiwan as a part of its territory and believes that it should be reunited with mainland through peaceful means. China has also been threatening to use force in case of independence of Taiwan. The updated U.S.-Japanese agreement is a matter of deep concern for China and considers agreement's reference to Taiwan as a violation of its national sovereignty. Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing said, "Beijing sought better ties with both Washington and Tokyo, China's two largest trading partners but he believes that "increasing U.S.-Japan military cooperation should be strictly bilateral and not encompass Beijing's arch rival Taiwan."<sup>25</sup> Regarding territorial issues, he emphasized that the disputed Diayu or Senkaku islands belong to China. "No glib words or tricky action can change this fact nor can it be changed, by any unilateral action by any foreign country"<sup>26</sup> he was talking in the context of Japan's decision to protect installations on the islands built by Japanese nationalists.

Contrary to China-Japan relations, the U.S.-China political relations are free from hatred and mistrust. While analysing the security threats to U.S., Porter Goss, the then CIA Director informed the senate intelligence committee that "Beijing's military modernization and military build-up could tilt the balance of power in the Taiwan Strait and also threaten U.S. forces in Asia."<sup>27</sup> Goss also told that "China is stepping efforts to develop robust, survivable nuclear

armed missiles as well as conventional capability for use in regional conflicts.<sup>28</sup>

### **Taiwan Issue**

Since Taiwan issue is the major hurdle between Sino-U.S. relations, the inclusion of Taiwan in U.S.-Japan agreement not only creates tensions in the region, it also inject problematic factors in the security scenario of East Asia. "With the reference of Taiwan in joint U.S.-Japan security objectives, the already tense political relations between China and Japan have deteriorated further and may have negative consequences for the overall political climate in the region", says Dr Zhang Guihong of Zhejiang University of China.<sup>29</sup>

In China it is an explicit expression of Japan's desire to pursue its political and military goals in the region. *Beijing News, a Chinese daily wrote in its editorial about the "dire consequences for the whole Asia-Pacific, should Japan's right-wing forces continue to use the alliance with Taiwan as a means to contain China."*<sup>30</sup> Despite close economic relations between China and Japan, political ties between the two countries have always remained strained. Beijing is also aware of the fact that strained political relations might jeopardize the economic ties.<sup>31</sup>

China has become critical of Japan's determination to work more closely with the U.S. Professor Zhangli lee is of the opinion that "an assured Japan. U.S. security relations will provoke firm response from Beijing."<sup>32</sup> Liu Jinsong, a Chinese official, feels that "the stronger Japan U.S. alliance, which can deter China is the top priority of Japan. This is the controversial issue between China and Japan."<sup>33</sup> Japan has assured the U.S. to defend Taiwan in case of attack by China and might provide military forces.<sup>34</sup> In this context, the Japanese help to defend the sea lanes north of Taiwan would be of utmost importance to the U.S. military if the U.S. navy were ordered into the sea.



It is not clear what sort of help would Japan provide to the U.S. the agreement apparently guarantee to help defend Taiwan in case of war. To Taiwan, the 450 ballistic missiles, China has deployed on its side of the Taiwan Strait is one of the gravest military threats it faces at present.<sup>35</sup> In response, Taiwan announced in 2003, its plan to include in the budget proposals for fiscal 2005 an appropriation for the purchase of Patriot PAC-3 ground-to-air missile systems that are expected to be capable of intercepting ballistic missiles.<sup>36</sup> For the time being, however, Taiwan has no credible defenses. However, the purchase of weapons from the U.S. by Taiwan will have a significant impact on U.S.-China relations. While both China and Taiwan are pressing ahead with military modernization, there is no hope of a political solution to the Taiwan issue. For Japan and the U.S. cooperation with China is important in dealing with North Korea, while, Taiwan fears that an improvement in the U.S.-China relations could undermine its position vis-à-vis China.

## **Conclusion**

Given the importance of the China-Japan-U.S. strategic triangle to security order in Asia Pacific, it is imperative that the U.S. should pursue a strategy that ensures a stable configuration in the triangular relationship. This analysis of China-Japan-U.S. triangle suggests that China can be a deeply divisive issue in Japanese-American relations, it can also serve to bring the two together. They are both aware that China is going to be a difficult partner to deal with in world affairs but the basis exist for cooperation among Beijing, Tokyo and Washington in the realms of security, economics and issues of interdependence. Hence J. Morgenthau often remarked that good foreign policy is good commonsense and that good commonsense generally makes good foreign policy.<sup>37</sup> Such observations provide a starting point for U.S. and Japan to build a constructive 21<sup>st</sup> century relationship with China. Common sense dictates that despite very real and significant differences on a number of issues, the U.S., Japan and China do share some common interests.

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