



The Changing Balance of Power in the Asia-Pacific And Its Impact on the U.S., Japan and China

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I. Introduction

The Forum on Asia-Pacific Security (FAPS) of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) hosted three days of Track 1.5 meetings in New York from May 18-20, 2015.

This is the first of two reports on those discussions and it deals primarily with the U.S.-Japan-China trilateral meeting that was held on May 18-19, 2015. A report on the U.S.-Japan-China-ROK quadrilateral meeting will be issued separately.

This report is not so much an effort to summarize the rich discussion at the trilateral meeting as it is an effort to analyze the complex and fragile nature of trilateral relations today and to offer suggestions to all three sides for improvement in their ties with each other.

The participant list for the trilateral meeting appears in the appendix.

II. Context

The U.S.-Japan-China trilateral meeting took place at a time of increased tensions in the East and South China Seas over competing territorial claims, continued regional controversy over Japan's accounts of its militarist past, and just months before the region commemorates the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in the Pacific. It also appeared to be a time of some positive movement in relations between Japan and China following a meeting between Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and China's President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the APEC summit last fall, and a subsequent meeting between the two in Bandung, Indonesia in April 2015. Several days after the trilateral on May 22, 2015, a 3,000 strong delegation of Japanese tourism and local government officials, led by a member of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), began a three-day trip to Beijing and were warmly welcomed by President Xi Jinping in the latest sign that relations may be on the mend.

Despite the warming trend in China-Japan relations and efforts both by Chinese and American leaders to manage their differences, there remain tensions and strains in both China-Japan and China-U.S. relations which seem unlikely to disappear. The following report is an effort to provide some context for assessing and analyzing the trilateral relationship.

*Several U.S. participants contributed to this report

III. The Changing Balance of Power

The rapid rise of China and the resulting change in the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific are the key structural factors influencing regional strategic dynamics, and it is having an important impact on the policies and outlooks of all three major powers. The rise of China has led to a debate in the United States both about China's goals and intentions and about U.S. responses to these. Some argue that China seeks to "replace the United States as the most important power in Asia" and that the U.S. should respond with a more vigorous balancing policy. (See Robert D. Blackwill and Ashley J. Tellis, "Revising U.S. Grand Strategy Toward China," Council on Foreign Relations, March 2015) Others want the United States to give China more space and to work towards greater cooperation. (See Michael Swaine, "Beyond American Predominance in the Western Pacific: The Need for a Stable U.S.-China Balance of Power," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2015)

The American participants in the conference believe that the alleged choice between balancing and cooperating with China is false. The United States can and should do both. The real choices will be in getting the mix between balancing and cooperation right. Moreover they and Japanese participants believe that whatever strategy the U.S. employs in dealing with the rise of China, there can be no doubt that a close and enduring U.S.-Japan security alliance is essential. As Blackwell and Tellis say, "without close and enduring U.S.-Japan security cooperation, it is difficult to see how the United States could maintain its present power and influence in Asia." That is why it is essential for the United States to substantially expand its security relationship with Japan and to help upgrade the Japan Self-Defense Forces.

At the same time, the United States and Japan both need to expand dialogue with China and to cooperate on areas of common interest. Neither the U.S. nor Japan wants a new Cold War in Asia. Nor, it is believed, does China.

That is why the NCAFP is promoting trilateral discussion. The NCAFP seeks to find areas where the United States, Japan and China—the Asia-Pacific's three great powers—can work together to address rising tensions, shared problems of concern and areas of mutual benefit. As the three largest economies of the world and as major military powers in the region, the three states have much to lose by not working together and much to gain through collaboration. Managing differences and developing rules of the road will be important issues in the future.

The changing balance of power has produced anxiety on the part of all three major powers. The U.S. is concerned about the erosion of the largely unchallenged regional dominance it has enjoyed since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Japan is worried about American staying power and the potential for retrenchment by the U.S. in the face of China's rise. Some in Japan also are wary of U.S.-Chinese moves towards greater cooperation. And China is worried about the potential for the combination of U.S. and Japanese power to thwart its ambitions or even contain it.

All three powers have reacted to changing regional dynamics with mixed strategies. The U.S. seeks both to balance or "hedge" against the uncertainties inherent in China's rise while also seeking to work together with China on areas of common interest. At the same time, the U.S. seeks to reassure Japan and other allies of its determination to remain the predominant regional power and of its intent to strengthen its alliances as one of the chief pillars of regional stability.

Japan has developed a three-pronged strategy. (See Gerald L. Curtis, "U.S. Rebalancing and the U.S.-Japan Alliance," Shanghai Conference, June 12-13, 2015) First, Tokyo seeks to do more for itself by increasing its defense budget and upgrading the quality of its defense forces. The second prong is to do more to sustain and strengthen the alliance with the U.S. And the third prong is to develop security relations with other countries in the region, especially Australia, South Korea, the ASEAN countries and India.

China, for its part, seeks to expand its economic, military and diplomatic presence in the region, to assert what it regards as its legitimate territorial claims in the East and South China Seas, to use its economic leverage to remind its neighbors of their growing dependence on trade with China, and to increase its partnership with other countries such as Russia and India in order to counter the U.S.-Japan alliance. At the same time, China also seeks to develop a stable and cooperative relationship with the United States on areas of common interest while managing the differences.

All three countries are keenly aware of the dangers of the "Thucydides trap" (the historical precedent for a struggle between an established and a rising power) and the "security dilemma," i.e. the potential for a regional arms race and the risk of confrontation leading to major power conflict which none of the three wants and which would be a disaster for all.

The challenge ahead is for all three powers to find ways to reduce tensions in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, to learn how to manage differences while expanding cooperation on areas of mutual interest, to develop rules of the road and to reach some consensus on regional security and economic architecture. Several participants thought that the establishment of an official governmental Track I trilateral dialogue would be a useful step in this direction.

IV. The U.S. "Rebalance" to Asia

The Obama Administration's policy of "rebalancing" towards Asia has been the subject of much discussion in China, the United States and the Asia-Pacific region in recent years. An American participant at the trilateral observed that there were widely divergent views about the U.S.' rebalancing policy. Many in the United States thought the policy was meaningless and not very robust as the U.S. continues to be preoccupied in the Middle East and elsewhere. On the other hand, many in China, including some of the Chinese trilateral participants, see the rebalance as ominous and directed against China.

One American argued that the U.S. rebalance was not meaningless but that it also did not have to be perceived as ominous.

There were, he said, three key misperceptions about the rebalance. The first misperception was that the rebalance started in 2011. The second was that it was largely military. And the third was that it was all about containing China. On the contrary, he argued, the rebalance began in 2009 at the very beginning of the Obama Administration and reflected the strategic view that the Asia-Pacific region is bound to be the most important region in the world in the 21st century. The rebalance was not only about the military dimension but also about diplomacy and regional participation, economics and engaging China. Public emphasis on the military dimensions of the rebalance generally began in 2011, and this occurred largely in response to China's more assertive policies on territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas.

The American concluded with several recommendations for each side. China should make clear that it is not pursuing a policy of "Asia for the Asians" with its connotation of excluding the Americans and degrading or ending U.S. alliances. It should clarify its "Nine-Dash Line" in the South China Sea and negotiate a code of conduct with its neighbors on maritime behavior. It should halt work on land reclamation in disputed islands in the South China Sea. And it should pursue a policy of joint development of resources in disputed areas.

The United States, for its part, should make clear its view that it is a false choice between balancing and cooperating with China. Rather the United States can balance China while cooperating with it at the same time. The United States should watch its rhetoric, cooperate on areas of common interest, and promote increased military to military dialogue with Beijing to reduce the possibility of miscalculations and to work with China on institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) which can be of benefit to all. The U.S. can and should reassure allies and friends without provoking China. Several American participants underlined the vital importance—geopolitical as well as economic—of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) for America's role in Asia.

Comments by Chinese participants on the American rebalance were mixed. One Chinese participant described the policy as "something more than hedging and less than containment, and it makes us nervous." Another Chinese participant described the rebalance as deeply unpopular in China and said that many Chinese viewed it as the continuation of more than half a century of U.S. efforts to "contain" China.

There were also more nuanced views from some of the Chinese. One Chinese participant distinguished between his own personal views as a long-time student of U.S.-China relations and those of most Chinese. He believed that the U.S. was simply seeking to balance China and that balance is not containment. On the contrary, he continued, for the last 30 years the U.S. has been seeking to engage China. But, he went on, 90% of Chinese, including many in government, academia and the media believe that U.S. policy has long been to contain China and that the rebalance is just the latest version of that policy.

The Japanese participants supported the rebalance policy in concept but seemed mixed on how credible and sustainable it is.

V. The U.S. Rebalance and U.S.-China Relations

The U.S. rebalance does not seem to be interfering with recent efforts to improve U.S.-China relations. One American participant reported that Beijing had gone out of its way to make the May 2015 visit of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry a success. PRC President Xi Jinping had told Secretary Kerry many times that he did not want problems with the United States and that stable relations with the U.S. were a high Chinese priority.

The Kerry visit also made clear that both the U.S. and China were looking forward to a successful Strategic and Economic Dialogue in June 2015 and to a successful visit by Xi to Washington, D.C. and New York in September.

With regard to the "new model" of major power relations, which the PRC has advanced as a formula for relations with the U.S., the U.S. has declined to sign on to the concept. Instead, the United States defines its goal for the relationship as avoiding conflict, expanding areas of cooperation and managing differences.

In the Kerry meetings with Xi, the U.S. participant continued, there was lots of discussion of the South China Sea and how to reduce tensions. There was also discussion of how to manage tension on other issues such as cyber security, human rights, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Although the Kerry visit demonstrates that leaders in both Beijing and Washington want to maintain a stable and cooperative relationship in the face of growing differences, there is a "darker" side of that relationship. Both Washington and Beijing have a long list of complaints about the other side. The most troubling current issue concerns differing views about the South China Sea. Moreover, the two most sensitive issues in U.S.-China relations, human rights and Taiwan, could soon resurface. Human rights could come to the fore because of Xi's massive crackdown on alleged hostile Western influences in China and Taiwan could again erupt because of the PRC's reaction to a possible DPP victory in the January 2016 presidential elections in Taiwan.

U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter gave voice to American concerns about Chinese policy in the South China Sea at a May 30, 2015 address to the annual Shangri-La security dialogue in Singapore.

The United States, he said, has "deep concerns about any party that attempts to undermine the status quo and generate instability there, whether by force, coercion, or simply by creating irreversible facts on the ground, in the air or in the water." Although, he continued, it is true that almost all of the nations that claim parts of the South China Sea have developed outposts over the years of differing scope and degree, China "has gone much further and much faster than any other." Just in the last 18 months, "China has reclaimed over 2,000 acres, more than all other claimants combined." The United States, he continued, "is deeply concerned about the pace and scope of land reclamation in the South China Sea, the prospect of further militarization" and the potential for "miscalculation or conflict among claimant states." The United States is concerned, along with many countries in the region, "about China's intentions in constructing these massive outposts."

At the same time Carter called on all nations to cease unilateral actions. He went on to say that the United States wants a peaceful resolution of all disputes, opposes any further militarization, and hopes that China and the ASEAN countries will conclude a "code of conduct" this year.

In the meantime, Carter warned, the United States "will fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows."

Several of these points were strongly reiterated by American participants at the trilateral.

The Chinese, on the other hand, have released a new White Paper outlining plans to include a new focus of their navy on maritime warfare. The White Paper accused the United States of "meddling" in the South China Sea and announced that the PLA will expand its operations from offshore areas to the open seas, while the air force will include offensive operations as well as defense of Chinese territory. (See *Wall Street Journal*, May 27, 2015, "Beijing Lays out a Tougher Military Posture." See also "China Outlines a Plan to Extend Naval Power," *New York Times*, p. A10, May 27, 2015)

Chinese participants at the trilateral generally took the position that China was simply reacting in the South China Sea to hostile actions by other countries (overlooked, or even prodded by the U.S.) and they encouraged the United States not to overreact to disputes in the South China Sea at the expense of the larger relationship.

In addition to these current tensions over the South China Sea, which was a major subject of discussion at the trilateral, there are other disturbing trends. One of the most ominous is Xi Jinping's "Asian Security Concept" which appears to exclude the United States. Xi delivered his concept to the May 2014 Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA). (For a discussion, see Kevin Rudd, "How to Break the 'Mutually Assured Misperception' Between the U.S. and China," *China-U.S. Focus*, April 22, 2015) In his speech to CICA, an organization which does not include the U.S., Xi outlined a concept of "common security," "comprehensive security," and "cooperative security" for the entire region. But he also made plain that his security concept did not include the United States or its alliance structure. (Rudd, op cit.) There has also been much Chinese rhetoric about American alliances being "Cold War relics"—the clear implication being that it is time for these alliances to end.

But if China attempts to exclude the U.S. from the region's security architecture, the result will most likely be an attempt by the U.S. to strengthen its military alliances and to divide the region.

Chinese participants at the trilateral meeting generally denied that it is China's intention to exclude the U.S. from the Asia-Pacific. The three sides did not pursue this topic in depth. It will, however, be a prime subject of discussion at future meetings.

In sum, the "security dilemma" is alive and well in U.S.-China relations as well as in the region generally.

VI. Japan's New Security Policy in the Region

Japan and the United States have agreed to "the most sweeping changes in Japanese security policy and U.S.-Japan security relations since the 1960 revision of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. The most important objective of these changes is to strengthen Japan's role in supplementing and helping sustain U.S. primacy." (Curtis, op cit.)

In accordance with these changes, the Abe government has sent a package of national security bills to the Diet which could become law sometime this summer. The legislation makes it possible for Japan to engage in "collective defense," meaning that it can come to the assistance of the United States, or another country, if they are attacked even if there is no attack on Japan itself. (Curtis, op cit.) The adoption of these laws will make it possible for Japan and the United States to substantially advance operational coordination and bilateral planning between their militaries, facilitate an expansion of Japan's regional security role, and extend security cooperation into space and cyberspace.

Japanese participants at the trilateral conference generally agreed that this new package of security measures was largely a reaction to Japan's new security environment brought about by the rise of China and increased threats from a nuclear North Korea. At the same time they stressed that the evolving security posture is natural for a major power, that it is incremental, not dramatic, and that military expenditures were modest in contrast to China's major and steady increases. Several Japanese participants noted that the Japanese public remains resistant to any major changes in Japan's defense spending and posture.

The Japanese participants agreed that there was positive movement in Japan-China relations since the Xi-Abe meeting at APEC last fall, that this was to be welcomed, and that hopefully the Sino-Japanese rivalry could be transformed into "constructive competition." But they also thought that the bundle of security, territorial and history issues between the two countries are long-range problems for which it will be difficult to find solutions and which could at best be managed.

Another common theme sounded by the Japanese participants was that the long-term future of Japan-China relations depends to a considerable extent on how China rises, what kind of political and social system evolves in the PRC and whether there is any fundamental change in the nature of China's authoritarian order.

Two other major Japanese concerns expressed at the trilateral were, first, the geographic reality of Japan living forever "in the shadow of China," and second, the growing rhetoric among a few Australian and American scholars about a need to "accommodate" China. Several Japanese participants expressed concern about what such "accommodation" would mean—with the implicit worry that it might jeopardize Japanese security. In addition, and along similar lines, several Japanese asked whether the U.S. would seek to maintain its primacy in the Pacific region. They explained the expansion of Japan's security roles as a sort of "hedging" strategy to respond both to concerns about China's increased military activities in the region as well as to concerns about the long-term staying power of the United States.

In sum, the message from the Japanese about Japan-China relations was a mixed one. A tactical improvement in relations seemed both possible and desirable over the short and medium term. But any long-range breakthrough depended on radical changes in China's external behavior and domestic system.

The American participants generally echoed the Japanese positions and interpretations of Japan's new security posture. They welcomed this as strengthening the alliance and promoting stability in the region. They also, however, emphasized that continuing controversies over history were sowing distrust over Japanese moves, harming relations with South Korea and giving the Chinese a club to attack Japan's policies. None of this, one American stressed, is in the interest of the United States.

Chinese participants also offered a mixed message about China-Japan relations. Most Chinese agreed with other participants that Japan is not now and is unlikely to become militaristic. Japan's defense budget, they recognized, is still relatively low. And most Chinese participants also welcomed the improvement in China-Japan relations which, they said, was in the interest of both countries.

But they emphasized that Prime Minister Abe had a long way to go to satisfy China on disputed history issues; that China has legitimate territorial claims in the East China Sea; that although state-to-state relations are improving, society-to-society relations remain problematic; and that there remains deep distrust of Abe within China. Indeed, while there has been some easing of official relations, public attitudes in each country are increasingly hostile toward the other. Moreover, the recent strengthening of the U.S.-Japan alliance is regarded with much suspicion in China because it is believed to be directed against China.

In sum, the China-Japan security dilemma also remains intact.

VII. China's Re-Emergence as an Asian Regional Power and Global Power

The rise of China, its expanded regional and global roles, as well as its increased military spending and more assertive policies were major topics of discussion at the trilateral. There was particular interest in how the rise of China would influence China-Japan and China-U.S relations and whether the three powers could learn to live cooperatively.

Several Chinese participants agreed that Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping was becoming more proactive and that this represented a change from Deng Xiaoping's low-profile policy. But they insisted that China's intention was to build a peaceful, secure, stable and prosperous Asia-Pacific region and to solve territorial problems peacefully. On the matter of reclaiming islands and building installations on those islands, the Chinese argued that they were simply following in the path of Vietnam and the Philippines. The Chinese also denied that their objective was to push the United States out of the region.

American and Japanese participants had a less benign view of Xi Jinping's foreign policy. One American said he agreed that China's goal was to have a peaceful region but China wanted also to ensure that its neighbors respect China's interests and to remind them that they all live in the shadow of China's power. China, he said, would use its growing economic power for leverage because each of its neighbors understand that China is now their largest trading partner and a hostile China could ruin their economies. China would also remind its Asian neighbors that the United States might not be in the region forever while they would always have to live in the shadow of China.

On territorial and sovereignty issues, said the American, the Chinese were increasingly making it clear that there is no room for compromise. He quoted a recent statement along these lines by China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi.

But the American was more optimistic about the potential for a dialogue on maritime disputes in both the East and South China Seas. It was particularly important, he said, to have a dialogue between China and Vietnam over the Spratlys, where China is building new bases and Vietnam controls between 25 and 29 of the land features.

A Japanese participant who has recently spent some time in China and who has interviewed a number of Chinese and American officials argued that the "strategic chemistry" between China and the United States is getting worse. The U.S., he said, feels a growing threat from China to the status quo in the region and China feels a growing threat to its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

VIII. Conclusions

The relationship between the Asia-Pacific's three great powers—the United States, Japan and China—will be critical in defining the international politics of the twenty-first century. It is impossible to imagine a stable, peaceful and prosperous Asia if there is strategic confrontation or conflict between the U.S. and China or between Japan and China.

Some degree of strategic rivalry between these three powers is perhaps inevitable. But it is not inevitable that this rivalry must lead to conflict.

The Asia-Pacific's three great powers can and should work together to address rising tensions, shared areas of concern and areas of potential cooperation. As the three largest economies of the world and major military powers in the region, the three states have much to lose by not working together.

Following are some recommendations flowing from the conference for each of the three sides.

IX. General Recommendations

The three powers have much to gain by launching an official, governmental (Track I) dialogue modeled on the policy planning staff trilateral which last met in 2008. Such an official trilateral could encourage a much needed discussion on areas of potential trilateral cooperation. The most promising areas to begin with are probably in the non-controversial areas such as energy, food safety, climate change and aging societies. But the three sides also have important common interests in dialogue on areas of tension such as developing codes of conduct, managing maritime tensions and the U.S. alliance system, as well as areas of convergence such as terrorism, Iran and Afghanistan. One particularly ripe area for consultation is Asia's economic arrangements, especially the future potential for combining TPP and RCEP into a free trade agreement for the entire region.

The three sides also have much to gain by increasing high-level summit meetings. The Xi-Abe meeting last fall on the sidelines of APEC was an important turning point in the Sino-Japanese relationship and the fact that a second summit took place in Bandung is a sign that both sides are increasingly inclined to better manage bilateral relations.

The three powers also have much to gain by working towards a cooperative solution to the territorial disputes in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. None of the claimants is going to renounce sovereignty. The only feasible solution, therefore, is to shelve the sovereignty issue, halt or restrain military activity in the air and sea around disputed areas, conclude a code of conduct and pursue the potential for joint development

On the history issue, China and Japan need to demonstrate a common will to leave the past behind and to focus on the future while developing rules of coexistence and a crisis management system. This was a common theme from Japanese participants during our meeting. And a Chinese participant said, along similar lines, that Beijing and Tokyo should reduce mistrust, stop provocative actions on the territorial dispute, learn how to manage differences and cooperate on common interests.

The three sides also have a common interest in economic cooperation and should highlight this in public statements. As one Japanese speaker said at a previous meeting, the U.S., Japan and China are the most important economic partners for each other. There are 23,000 Japanese companies operating in China and around 20,000 American companies are there. These evermore integrated supply chain relationships across national borders create powerful incentives to seek ways to accommodate each other.

The following suggestions for each country are the recommendations of the NCAFP.

China

China should:

1. Make clear that it is not pursuing a policy of "Asia for the Asians" which excludes the United States from Asian security arrangements.
2. Clarify its "Nine-Dash Line" and negotiate a code of conduct with its neighbors on maritime behavior in the South China Sea.
3. Halt work on reclamation projects in disputed islands in the South China Sea.
4. Pursue a policy of joint development of resources in disputed areas.
5. Respond positively to any constructive Japanese moves on history and the East China Sea.
6. Be more transparent about its military intentions as it increases its capabilities.

The United States

The United States should:

1. Make clear that it is a false choice between balancing and cooperating with China. Rather the United States can balance China while at the same time managing differences and cooperating with it on areas of mutual interest. But the U.S. should also make clear that balancing is not containment. Trade and investment relations, people-to-people exchanges, cultural and student exchanges and high-level senior meetings have greatly expanded in recent years. These are not the policies of one country seeking to contain the other.
2. Strike a balance that strengthens alliances without provoking China.
3. Continue to promote military-to-military cooperation with China in such areas as anti-piracy, natural disasters and search and rescue. Dialogue has already resulted in Chinese participation in RIMPAC and two codes of conduct for preventing conflict in the sea and in the air.
4. Cooperate with China and Japan on institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) both to ensure adherence to standards and to welcome China's role as a more "responsible stakeholder."
5. Continue to strengthen its alliance with Japan and to reassure Japan that it will come to Japan's defense against any threats. The United States should also reassure Japan and the ASEAN nations about its determination and capability to remain the dominant power in the Pacific.

6. Continue to develop relations with non-allied Asian nations, such as India and Vietnam.
7. Complete, with others, the TPP for both economic and geopolitical reasons.

Japan

Japan should:

1. Add a fourth prong to its defense policy of strengthening Japan's defensive capabilities, strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance and pursuing partnerships with other Asian countries such as Australia, the ASEAN countries, India and South Korea. The fourth prong should consist of an effort to outline a vision for collective security in the Asia-Pacific that would include a partnership between Japan and China to build on common interests which include a peaceful, stable and prosperous Pacific.
2. Use the upcoming 70th anniversary of the end of World War II to make appropriate statements on history designed to ease wounds and concerns in the region, especially in China and Korea.
3. Devise a formulation on the East China Sea dispute that protects its position on sovereignty but could be interpreted in China as acknowledging the existence of a dispute.
4. Seek major improvements in relations with South Korea, thereby strengthening the alliance system and regional security.
5. Continue to strengthen its ties with such countries as Australia, India and members of ASEAN.

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