



## May 2016 U.S.-Japan-China Trilateral Report

By Sheila Smith  
June 2016

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### Introduction

The Forum on Asia-Pacific Security (FAPS) of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) hosted a one-and-a-half day Track 1.5 meeting in New York City on May 24-25, 2016, with participants from the United States, Japan and China. The participant list for the trilateral meeting appears in the appendix.

This report is not so much an effort to summarize the rich discussion at the trilateral meetings, 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. In contrast to our November 2015 report, which focused on the interactions between and among the bilateral relationships that comprise this trilateral, this meeting focused on the changing regional security balance and the tension between national strategies and regional institutions which might impede cooperation in resolving the growing tensions in the Asia-Pacific.

### I. Context

Japan, China, and the United States once again found common purpose in the wake of North Korean nuclear and missile tests in early 2016. Pyongyang's continued insistence on developing a nuclear arsenal resulted in a new United Nations Security Council resolution and stronger sanctions on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). China took some time to agree, prompting concerns yet again in Tokyo and Washington that Beijing was reluctant to punish Kim Jong Un for his belligerence. After Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Affairs Wu Dawei visited Pyongyang in early February,<sup>1</sup> Beijing's position solidified, however, and China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Washington, DC three weeks later to meet U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry to finalize the terms of the resolution, stating clearly that "we are against the development of nuclear weapons by the DPRK." Yet Wang also emphasized that nuclear weapons should not be introduced in the South either, "either developed indigenously or introduced from the outside."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See details of February 2 visit at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-nuclear-china-idUSKCN0VB0TU>

<sup>2</sup> "Statesmen's Forum: Wang Yi, Minister of Foreign Affairs, PRC," Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 25, 2016, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/event/160225\\_statesmen\\_forum\\_wang\\_yi.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/event/160225_statesmen_forum_wang_yi.pdf).

For full text of his remarks at the press conference with Secretary of State John Kerry, see:  
<http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/02/253164.htm>.

Our trilateral discussion on the regional security environment reflected shared concern over North Korea's continued provocation and revealed a consensus that Pyongyang posed the greatest threat to regional security. All participants urged greater cooperation to prevent Kim Jong Un from developing and deploying further nuclear capabilities. Questions remained among some on whether China was willing to fully implement UN Security Council Resolution 2270,<sup>3</sup> suggesting lingering skepticism in Japan and the United States over whether Beijing was ready to impose costs on Pyongyang for its behavior. Furthermore, there was dissension from some of the Chinese participants on the U.S.-ROK discussion over the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD).<sup>4</sup> Overall, however, participants from all three countries seemed remarkably confident that they must work together to forestall North Korea from achieving its nuclear ambitions. American participants were, however, skeptical that China would fully implement sanctions because of its concerns about instability in North Korea.

Second, participants discussed cross-Taiwan Strait relations between the incoming Taiwanese president, Tsai Ing-wen, and Beijing. President Tsai's inauguration speech, according to several U.S. experts, was moderate and pragmatic and China should be patient and search for a modus vivendi.<sup>5</sup> Yet there was no similar reading from our Chinese colleagues who were generally suspicious and critical of Tsai. One Chinese participant noted that the speech did not go far enough, and in fact, President Tsai's repeated reference to two "countries" undercut the "one-China" principle.

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<sup>3</sup> This resolution broadened the depth and scope of previous sanctions (1695, 1718, 1874, 2087, and 2094) by covering cargo inspections and prohibitions of sales for aviation fuel and rare minerals. "Security Council Imposes Fresh Sanctions on Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2270," United Nations, March 2, 2016, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12267.doc.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> China has long opposed South Korea's possible deployment of THAAD as reflected in Chinese Ambassador Qiu Guohong's reported warning that it will "destroy" bilateral relations. The United States and South Korea launched a joint working group on March 4. "S. Korea, U.S. launch formal talks on deploying THAAD in Korea," *Yonhap News*, March 4, 2016, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2016/03/04/030100000AEN20160304004751315.html>.

<sup>5</sup> In her inaugural address, President Tsai's comment on the management of cross-strait relations since 1992 was as follows:

We will also work to maintain the existing mechanisms for dialogue and communication across the Taiwan Strait. In 1992, the two institutions representing each side across the Strait (SEF & ARATS), through communication and negotiations, arrived at various joint acknowledgements and understandings.

It was done in a spirit of mutual understanding and a political attitude of seeking common ground while setting aside differences. I respect this historical fact. Since 1992, over twenty years of interactions and negotiations across the Strait have enabled and accumulated outcomes which both sides must collectively cherish and sustain; and it is based on such existing realities and political foundations that the stable and peaceful development of the cross-Strait relationship must be continuously promoted.

See "Full text of President Tsai's inaugural address," *Focus Taiwan*, May 20, 2016, <http://focustaiwan.tw/news/api/20160520008.aspx>.

## **II. Japan, the United States and China Perceptions of Asia's Tensions**

An effort was made to take stock of Japanese, American and Chinese perceptions of relations among the three major powers and across the Asia-Pacific more broadly. Some pointed to 2009 as a turning point in regional relations, citing evidence that largely focused on Chinese behavior as prompting the deterioration in Beijing's ties with its neighbors. Needless to say, Chinese participants were puzzled with the attempt of some to describe a discernible turning point in relations between China and others in the region, arguing that little changed for Beijing that year that would constitute a policy shift.

On the positive side of the ledger, there was largely agreement that despite concerns over the rising influence and changing behavior of China, there were some baseline agreements that should be noted. All agreed that economic relations were a positive and should be sustained. Also, leaders in all three countries are emphatic in their stated desire to avoid conflict; it is inadvertent escalation to a conflict that is the worrisome challenge. Short-term efforts therefore are needed to develop risk reduction mechanisms for the militaries of all three nations, as well as to articulate norms for the behavior of all states in maritime Asia.

Less enthusiasm was voiced over the effort to build effective regional security mechanisms. Many of the Chinese participants argued for building new ways to organize regional security cooperation, but the implication was that a new configuration of regional security cooperation would replace existing U.S. alliances.

Finally, it seems unlikely that these three countries will agree on mutually acceptable dispute resolution mechanisms. The Philippine decision to submit its South China Sea (SCS) claims and Chinese behavior to arbitration under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) take Asia's maritime disputes out of the regional dialogue between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)<sup>6</sup> and place them instead in the context of the evolving international maritime regime.<sup>7</sup> Chinese experts argued that Beijing never acquiesced to binding arbitration given the terms under which China ratified UNCLOS, and they pointed out that bilateral discussions between Beijing and Manila were the preferred route to resolving current tensions.<sup>8</sup> Japanese and U.S. efforts to "intervene" in these talks were largely

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<sup>6</sup> The Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea was adopted by the foreign ministers of ASEAN and China at the ASEAN Summit in Cambodia in 2002. An early formulation of the Code of Conduct ([http://asean.org/?static\\_post=declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2](http://asean.org/?static_post=declaration-on-the-conduct-of-parties-in-the-south-china-sea-2)). States have argued for an early formulation of Code of Conduct, which comes with more binding force. The most recent China-ASEAN meeting in June 2016 failed to bring states together to issue a joint statement (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/asean-members-walk-back-statement-on-south-china-sea-1465924238>).

<sup>7</sup> For the progress of the Philippine claim against China in the South China Sea, see Mira Rapp Hooper and Harry Krejsa, "Reefs, Rocks, and the Rule of Law: After the Arbitration in the South China Sea," April 2016. (<http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNASReport-AfterArbitration-FINAL.pdf>) or "Arbitration on the South China Sea: Rulings from The Hague," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, (<http://amti.csis.org/ArbitrationTL/>).

<sup>8</sup> See "Position Paper of the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Matter of Jurisdiction in the South China Sea Arbitration Initiated by the Republic of the Philippines," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, December 7, 2014, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1217147.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1217147.shtml).

seen as a hindrance to resolution. There remains a fundamental gap between Chinese experts and others on how to structure dialogue and cooperation on regional security concerns. While Japanese and American participants see the alliances as an indispensable part of the architecture that ensures peace and stability, Chinese experts focus instead on the need for a security architecture that is far more inclusive and representative of all Asian nations.

Of particular note in this meeting was the continued dissonance between Japanese and Chinese experts. Continuing tensions between China and Japan over both history and intentions were clear throughout the meeting. While acknowledging the improvements in economic interactions between their two peoples, including a spike in Chinese tourism in Japan, Chinese experts were highly critical of Japan's expression of interest in the South China Sea. The Abe Cabinet's statements on the SCS as well as its expanding ties with the Philippines, Vietnam, and other Asian states in maritime and other strategic arenas were singled out by Chinese participants as exacerbating already "highly sensitive" issues between Beijing and its neighbors.<sup>9</sup> One Chinese expert asked aloud whether Tokyo would be comfortable with Beijing taking an interest in Japan's territorial differences with Russia or South Korea. Japanese experts responded with the observation that Japan has deep interests in a rules-based architecture, yet Beijing seems uncomfortable when Tokyo expresses that interest. An American expert said it sounded as if China took issue with the interests of Japan and others in the region that Beijing simply did not like.

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Abe joined President of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste Taur Matan Ruak to express "serious concern over the recent situation in the South China Sea." Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Lu Kang immediately followed by a fierce criticism that "Japan is not eligible to make comments on the South China Sea issue."

"Joint Press Release by Japan and the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste: Advanced Partnership towards Growth and Prosperity," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, March 15, 2016,

[http://www.mofa.go.jp/s\\_sa/sea2/tp/page4e\\_000390.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/s_sa/sea2/tp/page4e_000390.html).

"China rebuffs Japan-East Timor concern over South China Sea," *Xinhua*, March 17, 2016,  
[http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-03/17/c\\_135198967.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-03/17/c_135198967.htm).

### **III. How To Deescalate Tensions**

The overall assessment of our experts was that the Asia-Pacific today is less secure than in the recent past, and this was largely attributed to the growing tensions between China and the United States, as well as the ways in which others in the region were interpreting the intentions of China.

Many argued that strategic distrust needed to be replaced with greater confidence in cooperative solutions to regional security problems. Yet analytically there remained some dissension over the causes of this distrust. Two interesting strands of conversation suggested that the intellectual effort to grapple with the particular security dilemma between a rising power and a status quo power was far from over.<sup>10</sup> Chinese participants continued to advocate for a “new type of major power relationship,”<sup>11</sup> while American participants rejected the utility of the concept. An American participant suggested that perhaps too much was being made of this term, pointing out that the Bush Administration had continued to use the term “responsible stakeholder” even as Chinese policymakers rejected that way of describing their role in the world.<sup>12</sup>

But the larger structural reality of how the United States and China influence the region was also a concern. Contention between the two had potentially grave consequences for all Asian nations. The meeting reflected growing concern over the trend in U.S.-China relations. One Japanese participant observed that a more useful way of thinking about the problem was to focus on the way that economic interdependence intersected with strategic mistrust. Countries of the region were dependent on the United States for security but on China for economic growth. Tension between the two created new and severe strains for the diplomacy of all Asian states.

A second focal point was how to understand Chinese intentions. Throughout the two-day conversation, as ideas about regional approaches to diminish tensions were explored, participants repeatedly returned to this critical question of how to understand what Chinese leaders were thinking about their role in the region. For one American, this was the moment of judgment on China, and how the region read Beijing’s intentions would all boil down to its behaviors on three issues: full implementation of the UN sanctions against Pyongyang, acceptance of the new leadership in Taipei, and its response to the Philippine arbitration case. Others raised the larger question of what Chinese intentions really were regarding the existing global order. The postwar economic order created a prosperous and stable Asia-Pacific, and also fostered the current success of the United States, Japan and China. Was Beijing intent on challenging existing multilateral institutions? If so, to what end? Within Asia, regional

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<sup>10</sup> Sheila A. Smith, “Asia’s Great Powers and Regional Stability: A New Trilateral Dynamic Between the United States, China, and Japan,” *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 2015, 37:5-6, 303-310, DOI: 10.1080/10803920.2016.1162071.

<sup>11</sup> Cheng Li and Lucy Xu, “Chinese Enthusiasm and American Cynicism Over the ‘New Type of Great Power Relations,’” December 4, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2014/12/05-chinese-pessimism-american-cynicism-great-power-li-xu>.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Zoellick, “Whither China? From Membership to Responsibility” (Remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, September 21, 2005, New York City)  
[http://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/Zoellick\\_remarks\\_notes06\\_winter\\_spring.pdf](http://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/Zoellick_remarks_notes06_winter_spring.pdf)

institutions for decades now emphasized the benefits of economic interdependence to the peace and stability of the region, but this confidence has been shaken by Chinese behavior. There is growing worry that the consensus across Asia on the benefits of economic interdependence has given way to anxiety over how this interdependence could produce mutual vulnerability if the postwar order was challenged by China.

#### **IV. Managing Flashpoints**

The tensions in the SCS continued to draw the bulk of attention as the arbitration decision of the UN Tribunal drew near. A number of concrete ideas were presented for managing them. Chinese views on the SCS varied somewhat, but largely drew on the history of other claimants’ “illegal” occupation of the islands after World War II. In this view, China’s inability to protect its maritime interests prevented it from actively contesting the behaviors of the Philippines and Vietnam.

The East China Sea tensions were briefly discussed, with Chinese experts arguing that Japan’s nationalization of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands was the trigger for escalating tensions and Japanese pointing to the earlier advances of Chinese maritime presence in and around their country as their cause for concern. Interestingly, both Chinese and Japanese experts spent some time reviewing the history of the 2010 and 2012 clashes. Debate over the current interactions between the Coast Guards in and around the islands’ waters revealed that the current status quo is a predictable set of interaction between maritime forces, but not a comfortable one for the Japanese. Within two weeks of our meeting, Japan protested the entry into contiguous waters by a Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) frigate, ostensibly trailing several Russian naval vessels.<sup>13</sup> Despite this harsh diplomatic protest against China, another PLAN vessel entered Japanese territorial waters a week later.<sup>14</sup>

Despite these concerns over maritime interactions between China, Japan and the United States, all agreed that the Korean Peninsula remained the most likely flashpoint for the use of force in East Asia. (One U.S. expert pointed to tensions between India and Pakistan as a more likely cause of war.) Moreover, North Korea’s acquisition of a nuclear arsenal also opened the way for proliferation by East Asia’s non-nuclear powers.<sup>15</sup> A Japanese expert noted with some concern that while it was unlikely that Japan would acquire nuclear weapons, there was more reason today to think this would be seriously considered as an option than ever before. Thus, the world’s response to Pyongyang’s proliferation—and especially the U.S. response—was a critical factor in reassuring the Japanese that they need not feel the need to revisit that option.

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<sup>13</sup> Vice Minister Akitaka Saiki called in Ambassador of the People’s Republic of China to Japan, Cheng Yonghua, at 2 a.m. in the morning of June 9, 2016 to lodge a protest. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, [http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/press4\\_003377.htm](http://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/press/release/press4_003377.htm). Japan’s Defense Ministry also issued a press release: “Movement of a Chinese Navy Warship,” Press Release by Ministry of Defense, Japan, June 9, 2016, <http://www.mod.go.jp/e/pressrele/2016/160609a.html>.

<sup>14</sup> See “Movement of a Chinese Navy Warship,” Press Release by Ministry of Defense, Japan, June 15, 2016, <http://www.mod.go.jp/e/pressrele/2016/160615a.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Claire Chaeryung Lee, “Asia’s Multipolar Nuclear Future: An Interview with Matthew Kroenig,” National Bureau of Asian Research, June 15, 2016, <http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=698>.

## **V. Domestic Transitions and Asian Cooperation**

Despite their differences, participants agreed that the rising tensions were a problem and sought to regain confidence in cooperative approaches to resolving the region's security problems. Chinese participants urged new frameworks rather than building on old; for example, one scholar pointed out that the region in fact already has many security mechanisms but they do not overlap completely. Identifying where there are gaps might be one way forward. Japanese and U.S. experts sought to persuade their Chinese colleagues to invest time in support of existing institutions such as the ASEAN-centric fora for discussing regional security issues.

There was a great deal of debate over the future of China's internal reforms. One Japanese China expert argued that "China must change," provoking a heated debate over how that change was likely to manifest—in greater crackdowns within the country or in greater openness and transparency. Evaluating what is happening within China is essential, but attention should also be paid to domestic transitions in Japan and the United States. Some worried about the direction of the Abe Cabinet and the increasing "nationalism" of the Japanese. Many others expressed concern about the tone and tenor of the U.S. presidential election, and the candidacy of Donald Trump as the expected Republican nominee in particular.

Navigating the complex domestic political currents in all three countries are harder today as the regional balance of power transitions. While abstract ideas about how to organize regional cooperation are important, one scholar pointed out that what really matters will be how each country's strategy evolves. Small decisions, accumulating over time, in the context of today's tensions between these three major powers, must be understood. Above all, the impulse to abandon cooperation in favor of greater protectionism and military preparation needs to be resisted. Advocating for the benefits of a collaborative effort at establishing a more stable and transparent set of institutions for the Asia-Pacific is increasingly necessary, but the real test for the citizens of Japan, China and the United States is the demonstrable evidence that cooperation among these major powers protects rather than limits the interests of their society.

## **VI. Policy Recommendations & Conclusion**

Many participants agreed that while the SCS holds the greatest potential for conflict between major powers in the short-term, the most serious threat to regional peace and security is North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile program. Some Chinese participants advocated for a return to the Six-Party Talks, a mechanism that North Korea has yet again declared 'dead' as of June 2016. In the absence of Six-Party Talks, American participants wondered if China would be willing to engage in five party talks, on a formal or informal basis. One American participant also suggested that the three powers concentrate on freezing or dismantling North Korea's missile program, rather than its nuclear weapons. Eliminating the delivery system that would reach Japan or the United States may forestall a Japanese public reaction to obtain its own nuclear weapon or a desire by the U.S. to do something proactive on North Korea, which would create the instability that China fears on its borders. Still, other participants reminded the

group that South Korea would still be vulnerable to North Korean nuclear weapons, and that unconventional delivery of weapons and/or proliferation to terrorist actors would still be a major threat to peace and stability. Participants on all sides called for China to fully implement the UNSC Resolution 2270.

On maritime issues, Japanese participants called on China to adhere to a rules-based order, and with American participants, urged a conclusion to a Code of Conduct agreement. Although Chinese participants were skeptical of the ability of ASEAN countries to agree on such a Code, given the various national interests at stake, an American participant noted that it is time for such negotiations to grow beyond ASEAN countries. All major powers in the region, including China, have an interest in freedom of navigation in these disputed waters. Sovereignty issues should not preclude a sensible protocol that aims to prevent escalation and sets a standard for interactions. Chinese participants were equally adamant that the U.S. should carefully review its public attention to FONOPS, which they believe should be conducted on a much quieter basis, if at all.

All sides agreed that each government needs to do a better job of explaining the benefits of cooperation to their respective publics. Without public support, there is little political will in any of the countries for deeper cooperation, even on areas that are traditionally political safe, such as anti-piracy efforts or environmental sustainability. One Japanese participant noted that environmental issues related to China's rapid development are a regional problem, and that Japan has much to offer China in technology and expertise, given their own history of industrialization. But without better overall relations between China and Japan, there is little opportunity to pursue these types of non-traditional security cooperation.

American participants spoke of the need for the U.S. to get its act together at home, and cautioned Chinese and Japanese participants to be patient during the presidential campaign. Most participants thought that foreign policy would remain fundamentally unchanged after the election in November, but also warned that trade agreements may face trouble now and down the road as the American public seems wary to engage in new deals, including the TPP.

Finally, though the meeting was not focused on bilateral relations, participants on all sides agreed that improving bilateral ties between Japan and China, and between China and the United States, would be required for continued trilateral cooperation. In the absence of shelving sovereignty disputes, freezing in place the existing maritime interactions between the three sides and working toward a binding code of conduct may set the table for greater cooperation in the mid-to-long term. Meanwhile, greater coordination and communication is essential to managing the North Korean nuclear threat. Dialogues on the Track 1.5 and Track II level will continue to be a useful complement to official diplomacy on these issues.

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**A U.S.-JAPAN-CHINA TRILATERAL CONFERENCE**

**MAY 24 & 25, 2016**

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