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EVENT REPORT

MANAGING SINO-JAPAN-U.S. RELATIONS: RECALIBRATING THE TRIANGLE

Justin B. Liang

On May 30, 2008, the East-West Center in Washington held an Asian Security seminar on “Managing Sino-Japan-U.S. Relations: Recalibrating the Triangle” to explore the evolving triangular relationship between China, Japan, and the United States. Three distinguished panelists—Ming Wan, Professor of Government and Politics at George Mason University; Yoshihisa Komori, Editor-at-Large of *The Sankei Shimbun*; and Robert Sutter, Visiting Professor of Asian Studies at Georgetown University—discussed the changing dynamics of this triangular relationship and whether the so-called “Warm Spring” in Sino-Japanese relations, initiated by the recent meeting between PRC president Hu Jintao and Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, is indeed sustainable or merely a metaphor for cyclical dynamics that are as ephemeral as the seasons they describe.

SEASONS OF CHANGE

What did and did not happen during Hu’s historic five-day to Japan from May 6-10, and were there any major surprises? According to Wan, the summit—which was unusually long for a single-country visit by a Chinese head of state, and intended to show respect to the Japanese—succeeded in establishing a positive tone for subsequent negotiations. From a political perspective, the emphasis on peace and cooperation set a precedent for the two countries to assume a more future-oriented approach, signaling an implicit agreement from both sides to refrain from raising historical issues at the diplomatic level. While critics were quick to note the muted discussions on several contentious issues—Taiwan, Tibet, territorial disputes, the Olympic torch relay, and human rights—the summit nevertheless revealed a mutual aspiration to enter a new phase in bilateral relations based on common interests and conflict avoidance.

One surprise development after the summit was China’s decision to call upon Japan *first* for relief assistance after the catastrophic May 12 earthquake in Sichuan province, a gesture that was accompanied by an outpouring of sympathy for the Chinese from the Japanese media. The misfortune of the earthquake offered the Japanese government an opportunity to reinforce the sense of camaraderie in Sino-Japanese relations cultivated during the recent meeting, and China considered allowing Japanese Air Self-Defense Forces into Sichuan to deliver rescue teams and aid—though the decision was later overturned. Had the flights been approved, the mission would have been Japan’s first military dispatch to China since World War II.

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TRUST, CAUTION

According to Komori, while Hu's Japan visit left the impression of improved relations between the two countries, there remains a significant gap in Japan between public attitudes and the diplomatic façade put forth by Prime Minister Fukuda. In particular, two contentious issues were left off the summit's agenda—the safety of Chinese products imported by Japan and China's human rights situation—two issues that resonate strongly with the Japanese public, even if the government did not focus on them during the summit. A number of recent events attest to the disconnect between Japan's public opinion and government approaches towards China.

The poisoned dumpling incident in February 2008—in which hundreds of Japanese became ill after consuming tainted Chinese dumplings—catapulted Chinese products into Japan's media spotlight and exacerbated long-standing disputes over Sino-Japanese commercial relations. Ordinary Japanese citizens still remain wary of Chinese products—from foodstuffs to dietary supplements and toys—and many voiced disappointment that their Prime Minister did not highlight these issues in his discussions with President Hu. During the protests against the Olympic torch relay in Nagano, Japan received considerable support nationwide, underscoring the Japanese public's criticisms of Chinese human rights practices, including in Tibet. What was also underreported in the international media was the number of protesters in Tokyo on May 6, who took to the streets to oppose Hu's visit—the largest demonstration in decades against a foreign leader's visit to Japan. These incidents support the argument that economic and diplomatic engagement alone cannot breach the non-economic gap in Sino-Japanese policymaking—a gap that includes basic approaches to national security, human rights, and governance.

ADVANCED GEOMETRY: THE U.S. AND THE ASYMMETRIC TRIANGLE

What do these shifts in Sino-Japanese relations mean for the United States, and how should U.S. policy react to accommodate a triangular relationship that is becoming increasingly asymmetric? According to Bob Sutter, U.S. policymakers should be careful not to equate these changes with a need for increased intervention. Indeed, just as China and Japan have a history of fomenting tensions, so too have they historically been deft in diffusing these problems by themselves.

The U.S. must also recognize the constraints on Sino-Japanese tensions. Sutter identified four: (1) the mutual focus on effective nation building, which requires a workable relationship; (2) increasing economic interdependence; (3) effective measures on both sides to channel and control nationalistic sentiment; and (4) the interests and policies of other regional powers, which strongly militate against Sino-Japanese conflict. Taken together, these constraints also point to a diminishing—not a growing—need for U.S. intervention in the Sino-Japanese relationship.

At the same time, however, it is in the U.S. interest to understand fully the asymmetrical stakes in the relationship—and particularly the significance of Japan, which remains the linchpin of security in the region. As the U.S. has always championed a favorable balance of power and influence in the East Asian region—a balance that some see as being fundamentally altered by the rise of China—Japan, as a strong regional ally, remains critical to U.S. strategic interests. To this end, a U.S. policy of “tough love” that encourages China and Japan to settle their own difficulties may be most sensible. In the long run, Sino-Japanese relations are unlikely to deteriorate to the point of serious conflict that would be detrimental to U.S. interests. U.S. policy should thus seek to acknowledge the maturing Sino-Japanese bilateral relationship by minimizing unnecessary interference and emphasizing a “Rim strategy” that does not necessarily place China atop the regional policy agenda.