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Northeast Asian Trilateral Regional Cooperation: A Japanese Perspective

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Introduction

Japan has often been regarded as the closest ally to the U.S. in Asia. Japan signed the security treaty with the U.S. on September 8, 1951, at San Francisco, and the treaty was revised on January 19, 1960. Since then, Japan has been the most supportive power in Asia of American security commitment to this region.

However, it should also be noted that "Asia" has been one of the three pillars of Japan's diplomatic doctrine which was created in 1957. The Diplomatic Bluebook published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in September 1957 identified three principles for Japan's foreign policy: "United Nations-centered diplomacy", "maintenance of Japan's position as a member of Asia", and "cooperation with the free world". These principles were partial continuations of three major currents from Japan's prewar foreign policy, namely, internationalism, pan-Asianism, and cooperation with Britain and the United States. And they may be said to have reflected the respective positions of three major organizational units within the Foreign Ministry, namely, the International Legal Affairs Bureau, the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, and the North American Affairs Bureau. For many years during the postwar period, Japan's diplomatic posture was largely defined by these three elements, and considerable effort was devoted to reconciling them with each other.²

Japan's Initiative to an East Asian Community

Japanese government has presented its efforts to promote Asian regional cooperation at various occasions. For example, on January 14, 2002, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi initiated important step to create an East Asian community by saying that "Our goal should be the creation of a 'community that acts together and advances

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² Yuichi Hosoya, "Japan in Search of New International Identity", Nippon.com., October 3, 2011, <http://www.nippon.com/en/features/c00201/>; and also Yuichi Hosoya, "Japanese National Identity in Postwar Diplomacy," in Gilbert Rozman (ed.), *East Asia National Identities: Common Roots and Chinese Exceptionalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

together."³ Koizumi also mentioned that he "expect that the countries of ASEAN, Japan, China, the Republic of Korea, Australia and New Zealand will be core members of such a community".

This resulted in the first East Asian Summit of December 14, 2005. Foreign Minister Taro Aso spoke of the beginning of a new regional cooperation in East Asia by saying that "It is the launch of the East Asia Summit process that will turn the page into this new chapter."⁴ Then Aso argued that

The first East Asia Summit, in my view, will be leaving its mark on history in one important respect: this gathering, more than any other that the leaders of ASEAN have fostered over the years, will be the one in which we share a common dream for the future.

In this initiative, Foreign Minister Aso also said that "Japan is, for the countries of Asia, a 'thought leader,' and, indeed, it must be one."

However, historical issues and territorial disputes in East Asia had become main barriers to the further advance of this process. Particularly, the year 2005 marked as a year when the fiercest anti-Japanese demonstrations occurred in Chinese major cities. The time was not yet ripe for further regional integration in East Asia with stronger nationalist sentiments among these countries.

The Rise and Fall of the Trilateral Summit Meeting

In 2008, new initiative was launched in Fukuoka, a hometown for then Prime Minister Taro Aso. The heads of Government and State of Japan, China and the Republic of Korea met there to start the Trilateral Summit Meeting among three Northeast Asian countries. Prime Minister Aso, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao of China and President Lee Myung-Bak of the ROK "gathered here to help lay a solid foundation in promoting our tripartite cooperation in the years to come, building upon progress to date." This is because, three governments agreed;

Our economies are dynamic, resilient and closely interlinked. Our cultural and people-to-people ties are strong. We share common challenges as well as opportunities. We uphold visions and responsibilities for creating a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable future for the region and international

³ The Speech by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, "Japan and ASEAN in East Asia A Sincere and Open Partnership –", January 14, 2002, Singapore, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0201/speech.html>.

⁴ The Speech by Foreign Minister Taro Aso, "Asian Strategy As I See It: Japan as the 'Thought Leader' of Asia", December 7, 2005, Tokyo, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/fm/aso/speech0512.html>.

community, and our tripartite cooperation contributes to achieving that goal.⁵

Once again, optimism prevailed in this region. However, five days before, Chinese public vessel violated Japanese territorial water around the Senkaku Islands for the first time in history. The vessel remained inside of the territorial water for nine hours, and this resulted in the worsening of the tension between Japanese and Chinese governments over the Senkaku Islands. This new development undeniably affected regional cooperation in the Northeast Asia. Between Japanese and Korean governments, on the other hands, the comfort women issue became a very difficult diplomatic agenda to be dealt with carefully.

Due largely to these diplomatic and political antagonisms over historical and territorial issues, three governments could not hold a trilateral summit meeting since the Fifth Trilateral Summit Meeting of May 13, 2012. Since President Lee Myung-Bak landed onto Takeshima, a disputed territory between Japan and South Korea, on August 10, 2012, the bilateral relationship between the two countries had become deteriorated. In addition, the decision taken by Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda to purchase three small islands of the Senkaku from Japanese private owners on September 2012 enraged Chinese President Hu Jintao. As a result, three governments agreed that it would not be difficult, if not impossible, to convene the next Trilateral Summit Meeting in the coming years.

Abe Came into Office

On December 26, 2012, Shinzo Abe came into the Prime Minister's Office for the second time. Abe is often regarded both in China and Korea as a revisionist right-wing politician, and this image made it even harder to resume the Trilateral Summit Meeting. Both Chinese and ROK governments had concerns that Prime Minister Abe would revise the position of Japanese government on historical issues exemplified by the Murayama statement of 1995 which apologized for the damage and suffering caused by Japan to its Asian neighbors during the Second World War.⁶ Abe had often been dubious on the content of this Murayama statement, and some conservative right-wing Diet members pressured Prime Minister Abe to revise the position of the government.

⁵ Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit, Joint Statement for Tripartite Partnership, December 13, 2008, Fukuoka, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/jck/summit0812/partner.html>.

⁶ The Statement by Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, "On the Occasion of the War's End", 15 August 1995, <http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/press/pm/murayama/9508.html>.

Prime Minister Abe reaffirmed clearly in his historical statement of August 14, 2015, that Japanese government upheld the Murayama statement. Japan's national identity as a peace-loving country has now become a national consensus which both the liberal-left and the conservative-right can uphold. In his historical statement, Abe said, "on the 70th anniversary of the end of the war, I bow my head deeply before the souls of all those who perished both at home and abroad."⁷ Then he continued saying, "I express my feelings of profound grief and my eternal, sincere condolences." Based upon this "profound grief" and the "eternal, sincere condolences," Japan decided to pave a peaceful path when the war ended in 1945, and has become a peace-loving country since then.⁸

Seeing Abe's historical statement, both Chinese and South Korean governments began to soften their attitude towards Japan under Abe's Cabinet. On November 1, 2015, Prime Minister Abe, Prime Minister Li Keqiang of China and President Park Geun-Hye of the ROK gather in Seoul for the Sixth Trilateral Summit Meeting, and issued "Joint Declaration for Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia", perhaps the most comprehensive document of the trilateral cooperation among the three.⁹ In this joint declaration, it is mentioned that;

Acknowledging that steady progress has been made in trilateral cooperation in various areas despite fluid situations in the Northeast Asian region in recent years, we shared the view that trilateral cooperation has been completely restored on the occasion of this Summit, held almost three and a half years after the Fifth Trilateral Summit held in May 2012. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, and Li Keqiang, Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, expressed appreciation for the efforts made by Park Geun-hye, President of the Republic of Korea, the chair country, to restore trilateral cooperation during the past years.

Even though there still exist concerns and tensions among the three countries, they agreed that they should continue to use this framework to promote peace and prosperity in Northeast Asian region.

Conclusion

It should be reminded that Prime Minister Abe has been serious to promote regional cooperation both in East Asia and Northeast Asia. This is mainly because these

⁷ Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, August 14, 2015. http://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201508/0814statement.html.

⁸ Yuichi Hosoya, "Historical Memories and Security Legislation: Japan's Security Policy under the Abe Administration", *Asia-Pacific Review*, Volume 22, No.2 (2015), pp.44-52.

⁹ "Joint Declaration for Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia" at the Sixth Trilateral Summit Meeting, November 1, 2015, Seoul, http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page1e_000058.html.

regional cooperation is vital to strengthen Japanese economy and Japanese national security.

It is clearly written in Japan's first National Security Strategy paper of 2013 that;

In promoting the efforts mentioned above, Japan will actively utilize and engage in the further development of functional and multilayered frameworks for regional cooperation, starting from Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN+3, ARF, the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus), to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and trilateral frameworks, such as Japan-U.S.-ROK, Japan-U.S.-Australia and Japan-U.S.-India, as well as Japan-China-ROK, a grouping of three large neighboring economic powers. In addition, Japan will appropriately contribute to the creation of a more institutional security framework in East Asia in the future.¹⁰

Japan's biggest trading partner is China, and not the U.S. The rise of China has been Japanese opportunity for decades, and no Japanese prime ministers criticized the rise of China as itself. If the three powers, China, Japan and the ROK, can collaborate much more effectively, it will undoubtedly bring both faster economic growth and better security environment. However, since nationalist sentiment become stronger in the three countries, it is not easy for the three governments to further promote this regional cooperation. As long as rational consideration is prioritized to nationalist and populist causes in their respective domestic politics, Northeast Asian regional cooperation has much brighter future.

¹⁰ Japan's Cabinet Secretariat, National Security Strategy, December 17, 2013, <http://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>.