

From whine-whine-whine to win-win-win
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In its analysis of trilateral relations, the United States Institute of Peace concluded that the three countries “all face regional and global challenges ... [that] underscore the importance of regional and trilateral dialogue, consultation and coordination.” It notes that key concerns – the financial crisis and North Korean nuclear proliferation -- provide opportunities for cooperation but cautions that the sensitivity of those issues means that national interests might conflict as the governments fashion responses to them. The report applauds improving relations among the three countries, but worries about limits imposed by domestic politics in Japan and China. Equally significant, it laments the suspicions that dominate trilateral relations: each government is nervous about bilateral talks it isn’t part of.

As always, the USIP provides an accurate assessment. Unfortunately, this analysis is over a decade old.¹ Sadly, the opportunities and obstacles it identifies remain as compelling as ever. (The economic crisis it refers to is the Asian Financial Crisis; it is, however, the same North Korea.) That leads to the conclusion that we haven’t reached “a New Era of Peace” as the title of this session suggests. Circumstances have certainly changed in the last decade, but many of the fundamentals that define and delimit trilateral relations have not. The door to a more productive trilateral relationship is open – wider than before – but much more progress must be made before we can call this a new era of peace.

The whole is less than the sum of its parts

What is most remarkable today is that for one of the first times in contemporary history, all the dyads within the U.S.-Japan-China triangle are positive. The Japan-China relationship has steadily improved since Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro left office. While his successors have made this upswing possible by steering clear of Yasukuni Shrine, China deserves credit as well for reaching out to Tokyo and making clear its interest in a better relationship. U.S.-Japan relations have receded since the George-Junichiro days, which are likely to be seen as the high-water mark of that relationship owing to their remarkable personal rapport and the particular circumstances that marked the first five years of this century. But the foundations of the alliance remain stable and the two countries seem to have a better understanding of their mutual expectations. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s decision to make Tokyo the first stop on her first overseas tour sent the right signal, as did the invitation to Prime Minister Aso Taro to visit President Obama in the White House (especially given his political troubles.) Next

¹ “Trialogue”: U.S.-Japan-China Relations and Asian-Pacific Stability, United States Institute of Peace Special Report, September 1998, Special Report no. 37.

year marks the 50th anniversary of their security treaty and events associated with that landmark are expected to consolidate their alliance.

Finally, the U.S.-China relationship is also on solid footing. Contrary to expectations, China did not become a political football in the 2008 presidential campaign. The Obama administration appears to be continuing many of the Bush administration's policies toward China (with the requisite repackaging that comes with any change of government), much to Beijing's relief. High-level dialogues remain a staple of relations, evidence that the relationship with China remains a U.S. priority, an outgrowth of the belief that China is a major player in regional and global affairs. There has not been a test of the new president's resolve – the *Impeccable* incident didn't rise quite to that level, disturbing though the Chinese ships' behavior was – and the U.S. continues to resist the temptation to blame China for the various ills that have descended on the country. (Whether China is to blame for those troubles is irrelevant; the temptation to scapegoat is well-nigh irresistible.)

Yet when the perspective turns from bilateral relationships to genuine trilateralism, there is less reason to celebrate. Despite a burgeoning number of track-two discussions – my organization, Pacific Forum CSIS, has run one for over a dozen years² and I have participated in several others – there is little sign that our governments are ready to adopt that format. For a couple of years now, in bilateral and trilateral discussions, the prospect of a “2+2+2” meeting (foreign and defense ministers) has been raised and endorsed, but something invariably blocks its realization. At one point, China was resistant, fearing that the U.S. and Japan would gang up on it. Then, the U.S. was the holdout, worried that it would send the wrong signal (that it had elevated Beijing to an equal status with that of Tokyo.) Even in multilateral forums where trilateral cooperation could take place under a larger umbrella – such as the Six-Party Talks to deal with North Korea's nuclear ambitions – the concept remains untested. Why?

Whine-whine-whine relations

The main reason is that despite the progress in bilateral relations, suspicions still dog trilateralism. Their protests notwithstanding, all three governments worry about what happens in “the other bilateral,” the one it doesn't attend. Let's look at each in turn.

China-Japan relations. This relationship is least problematic for the third party, in this case the U.S. Of course, there are some in the U.S. who worry that the Tokyo-Beijing axis could provide the cornerstone of a regional integrative effort that closes the region to the U.S, but that sort of paranoia doesn't get much traction. (It did two decades ago, when Japan was ascendant, but those are distant memories today.) In fairness, however, the constant U.S. references to the need for “open,” “inclusive” regionalism suggest that there are some doubts about long-term prospects and this shouldn't be dismissed out of hand. But there is little indication that Japan-China relations are seen as the threat. A CRS analysis betrays some suspicions by suggesting that Beijing has improved relations

² Available in the Pacific Forum's *Issues & Insights* series, (www.pacforum.org), the reports track over time the state of the trilateral relationship and the various dyads.

with Japan to complicate Tokyo's decision making. Chinese leaders are thought "perhaps to be seeking to nudge Japan out of its orbit as a U.S. ally, or at least to make more difficult Tokyo's choices between advancing future PRC or U.S. interests."³

Most serious U.S. observers of the region see deep-rooted obstacles to substantive cooperation (some of which will be explored below). For Americans, the problem isn't too much cooperation, but too little. This reflects among other things, a growing realization of the limits of U.S. power. Americans recognize that achieving national security objectives requires cooperation, and given the nature of new security threats, the more broadly based such cooperation, the better. Bilateral approaches have worked but they are increasingly seen as too limited; this is the impetus behind the renovation of America's Asian alliances and the call for greater linkages among allies, friends, and partners.

Some in the region believe the U.S. prefers tense relations between the two to maximize Washington's leverage and influence in the region. The truth is just the opposite.⁴ The U.S. wants good relations between the two countries; since it is a security partner of Japan, conflict between Japan and China would involve the U.S. There is also some measure of arrogance lurking beneath U.S. thinking: We are reasonably sure that both Japan and China need us more than they need each other and believe that neither is prepared to jeopardize its relationship with the U.S. for relations with the other.⁵

U.S.-Japan relations. The U.S.-Japan alliance, like all U.S. alliances in Asia, is routinely dismissed by Chinese analysts as "a Cold War relic." It is said to reflect outdated thinking and attempts to renovate it, it is argued, appear to be aimed at "containing China" or blocking its rise. Enlightened Chinese analysts acknowledge "the historical reasons for the alliance," but they also urge the two countries "to adjust and accommodate to a changing world." That means refraining from interfering in China's internal affairs. A noted Chinese scholar of the U.S. provided a window on the thinking of his community when he noted in a trilateral conference last year that "Japan and the U.S. see China as a security concern, if not a threat." The references to China and Taiwan in the 2005 statement of the Security Consultative Committee (SCC, or 2+2 meeting) are seen as proof of the two allies' malign intentions.

Objections to the alliance generally take two forms. Either the two countries are seen to be developing ways to strengthen their alliance in ways that threaten Chinese interests, or the U.S. is thought to be pressing Japan to shed the self-imposed restraints on a higher

³ "Sino-Japanese Relations: Issues for U.S. Policy," by Emma Chanlett-Avery, et al, CRS Report R40093, Dec. 19, 2008.

⁴ See "Sino-Japan Rivalry: A CNA, IDA, NDU/INSS, and Pacific Forum CSIS Project Report," *Issues & Insights*, No. 07-02, March 2007.

⁵ That is a fair assessment today, but it may not be true in the medium-term future. Few U.S. strategists look that far over the horizon. For those that do, the trends are troubling. The proper response to them is not to undermine Japan-China relations, however, but to ensure that the U.S. is deeply integrated with both Japan and the emerging "Asian community." For more, see "The Guillotine: The Security Implications of Japan's Demographic Transition," by Tomoko Tsunoda and Brad Glosserman, forthcoming.

security profile, a process that would ultimately lead Japan to check or balance China. Concerns include the development of a missile defense system that would blunt China's strategic forces, arms sales or merely even relations with Taiwan that reinforce Taipei's resistance to unification, or the promotion of political systems or values that aim to undermine communist party rule.

U.S.-China relations. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that for Japan, the U.S.-China relationship is the equivalent of a fun-house mirror that magnifies and distorts Japan's perceived flaws. When Tokyo looks west, it sees a large confident nation, blessed with considerable resources – a nuclear arsenal and a permanent seat on the United Nations prominent among them – that is prepared to assert itself on the regional and global stage. In the mirror it sees a small, vulnerable country, isolated in Northeast Asia, threatened by neighbors, and protected by a distant ally. Most significantly, Japan is consumed by the political confusion that has been created by a divided Parliament and the prospect of the first genuine alternation of government in postwar history.

Japanese decision-makers worry about the arrival of a Democratic administration in Washington; historically, they believe Republicans give the U.S.-Japan relationship a higher priority than do Democrats. They sense a distancing in U.S. and Japanese positions on key issues, particularly the North Korean nuclear crisis, and some muted voices even question the credibility of the U.S. commitment to defend Japan. Japanese hear calls for a G2 and fear the eclipse of their special relationship with the U.S. as the U.S. and China work on important issues and hold high-level dialogues. Those concerns are magnified by the confusion in Tokyo. Japan's seeming impotence – and it is only *seeming*, not real – compounds Japanese insecurities. As I argued last year, Japan bashing has returned, only the bashers today are Japanese.

A cornerstone of (dis)trust

The reasons for the mutual distrust and suspicion are well known. Since we have visited them in various panels in recent years, the discussion here can be brief.

The U.S. no longer worries about Japan opting out of its alliance, but there are seeds of doubt about long-term orientation. China is seen as a partner, but one that must be hedged against, not because of any innate threat, but out of prudence. Chinese are convinced that the U.S. has neither accepted its rise nor its eventual return to a position of regional and global prominence. Chinese also believe that Japan still harbors dreams of its own regional supremacy and short of that will not accept neither equality with nor a subordinate role to China. In Tokyo, there is fear of abandonment by the U.S. and threats from and the prospect of domination by China.⁶

⁶ There is abundant polling in all three countries to prove these points. For data on Japan, see "Confidence and Confusion: National Identity and Security Alliances in Northeast Asia" by Brad Glosserman and Scott Snyder, Pacific Forum CSIS, *Issues & Insights*, Vol. 8, No. 16, September 2008, p. 12-16. A similar analysis of China is forthcoming.

Even when there is a coincidence of views when it comes to identifying threats or challenges, the three governments don't characterize them the same way or afford them the same priority. Dealing with North Korea is the most obvious case in which a rhetorical commitment to a shared objective barely masks deep divisions; the frailty of their consensus is revealed when it comes to responding to Pyongyang or fashioning a strategy that works toward the mutually agreed-upon goal.

Digging deeper, there are in the case of Japan and China enduring tensions that are the product of two proud insular cultures that see relations in hierarchical terms, have different perspectives on history, and whose national interests sometimes clash. Finally, among policy makers there is also an almost conditioned sense of dread that accompanies the rise of new powers. If they have studied history, Great Powers feel uneasy, if not threatened. Orders will be reordered. Rising Powers see that unease as directed against them, attributing to the old order a resistance to their emergence. These don't have to be prophecies to be self-fulfilling.

In addition, the three relationships are asymmetrical. Two of the three countries are allies. That structural imbalance tilts the triangle and raises a basic question: is trilateralism designed to create an equilateral triangle of three equal bilateral relationships, or is it intended to strengthen the triangle despite a longer, weaker, third leg? The second answer seems more likely, but absent a clear and shared understanding of objectives, trilateralism is not likely to succeed and may only compound problems.

There are other less obvious problems with trilateralism that can be equally pernicious. The first is another structural issue: "the odd man out." While the U.S.-Japan-China trilateral gets the most attention in discussions of trilateralism, two other Northeast Asian triangles deserve note: the "plus Three" of China, Japan, and South Korea, and the "virtual alliance" of the U.S., Japan, and South Korea. Each is designed to address particular concerns and is best suited to certain circumstances. Unfortunately, however, those concerns aren't restricted to the three parties at the table. Just as U.S. interests can be impacted by decisions made together by leaders from Beijing, Seoul, and Tokyo, so too can Chinese interests be affected by agreements struck between Japan, South Korea, and the U.S., and Seoul is equally perturbed about the prospect of Americans, Chinese, and Japanese deciding on actions, in say, North Korea, without its input. As Ralph Cossa likes to point out, the prevailing attitude is "trilateralism is good as long there are four parties in each trilateral."⁷

A second problem concerns how trilaterals relate to other multilateral forums in the region. We're all acquainted with the "noodle bowl" of multilateral arrangements in East Asia that address economic, cultural, political, and security issues. Trilateral discussions are not only another layer (or strand, to stick with the metaphor) of relations, but they can also be viewed as substitutes for other forums. Given the investments by other regional governments in some of those forums, the decision to pursue a trilateral discussion is potentially worrisome. On one level, this is an efficiency issue: how do governments

⁷ The U.S.-Japan-Australia trilateral discussion is also worthy of note, but it only gets a mention here as the focus of this paper is Northeast Asia.

allocate limited resources (diplomats, time) most effectively? A second level is symbolic. What message is received (much less sent) when leading powers in the region meet to discuss shared concerns? Does this anticipate a condominium within the region (China-Japan) or more widely (China-U.S.) that might take precedence over other regional forums?⁸

You can't always get what you want

The list of shared concerns and areas in which the three countries can cooperate and contribute to regional peace and stability is long. In the security field, it includes halting North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and failing that, containing the negative consequences of its actions; halting WMD proliferation and ensuring the safe spread of nuclear energy; antipiracy and sea lane security; counterterrorism; humanitarian aid and disaster relief; promoting norms that encourage transparency, build confidence, and dampen tension; promoting the safe and peaceful exploration of space. Given their central roles in global trade, the three can work together to ensure product safety for consumers and safeguard the production chain. They can promote energy efficiency and green technologies. They can try to mitigate the environmental affects of breakneck development. In economic matters, they can push for regional – and global – trade rules that are more equitable and fair. They can boost regional economic shock absorbers. In short, the three, if they chose, could set standards and norms for themselves, that, by virtue of their size and significance, would have a powerful impact on the Asia Pacific region and beyond.

The problem is that depressing list of obstacles that has consumed the bulk of this paper. Realism obliges the three to lower their sights. If the three governments go into trilateral talks with inflated expectations of what they can accomplish, then the suspicions and mistrust will only be magnified; rather than bridging divisions, trilateralism will deepen them. If this assessment is correct, then trilateralism should be viewed first as a confidence building exercise, rather than a mechanism to produce tangible results. The main goal should be diminishing apprehensions of “the other” about the bilateral conversations to which it is not a party. That may not be a bold statement of purpose, but if successful, such discussions could provide an anchor for more substantive talks.

As a starting point, a meeting of the three countries' top leaders makes sense. Setting the agenda for that meeting would be a CBM in its own right as it would force the three governments to begin the process of identifying core concerns – some shared, some not. This is a critical step since “effective trilateralism begins with mutual efforts to support each country's core strategic vision.”⁹ From my vantage point, that means accepting the ongoing U.S. role as a key player in Asia, helping Japan in its quest for a higher security and political profile in Asia, and facilitating China's peaceful rise. Moreover, the meeting would signal the three countries' bureaucracies and publics that they should see the trilateral as an acceptable mechanism for discussion and problem solving.

⁸ “China proposed division of Pacific, Indian Ocean regions, we declined: US Admiral,” *Indianexpress.com*, May 15, 2009.

⁹ “U.S., Japan, and China Conference on Trilateral Security Cooperation,” by Carl Baker, *Pacific Forum CSIS, Issues & Insights*, June 2008, p. vi.

We shouldn't kid ourselves, though: leaders' meetings without substantive follow up won't change anything. In my mind, a particularly valuable target is the planning groups in the three countries' foreign ministries. Meetings of strategic planners could continue the process of exploring strategic visions and seeking common ground. Obviously the more strategic thinkers in other departments, such as national security councils or defense establishments, could be included would be better, but internal political rivalries might make that too ambitious at this point. A trilateral defense dialogue would be especially valuable but seems like a real long shot without more preparation by and pressure from top political leaders.

Top-down signals are vital, but equally important – and perhaps more enduring – are bottom-up efforts that thicken the web of contacts and can provide shock absorbers if and when relations take another downturn. Whether the motivation is tourism, business, education, or civil society activism, there is a steady and expanding flow of people between the three countries. Such increased exposure can facilitate the understanding that, for all their differences, there are significant and compelling similarities among the three countries as well.¹⁰

¹⁰ Mind you, that is “can” facilitate understanding; it isn't necessarily so. Increased exposure can create or reinforce problems. The implication is that we shouldn't be laissez faire about exchanges and the like. There should be targeted efforts, too. Governments shouldn't be doing all the work, but there should be some attempt to guide some of them.