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Are China and the US on a Collision Course?

US-China Relations and East Asian Security: a Japanese Perspective

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“U.S.-China Relations and East Asian Security: A Japanese Perspective”

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Introduction

The rise of China is phenomenal. This phenomenon, however, entails two future possibilities. One is that the rise of China will remain a constant in one way or another in the foreseeable future, and will continue to present itself as the centripetal factor shaping an international order. Alternatively, the rise may be frustrated economically, socially, or even politically, and the management of its negative repercussions both domestically and globally will become a central theme of regional and global affairs. Although the second possibility remains anyone’s guess, it is not entirely impossible given mounting domestic problems that the current Chinese leadership faces amid quite fluid and uncertain environments. However, the dominant assumption today in the global debates about the rise of China is the former, upon which discussions in this paper are also based.

Under this trend, the strategic relationship between the United States and China could be described as the two great powers having “different dreams in the same bed.” Both need strategic co-existence with each other to tackle their own agenda, but their long-term strategic visions

run parallel to each other. The basic differences will continue to exist over the long run in the domain of long-term military strategies of Pentagon and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), as well as in terms of the so-called universal values including democracy and human rights. Precisely because of these fundamental differences, however, the United States and China will attempt to avoid ultimate confrontation and build cooperation out of necessity.

This does not mean, however, that there is no aspect to worry about. Much of the military logic and long-term planning of PLA and Pentagon are in a collision course. The Chinese logic behind its territorial claims in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, that they are Chinese since the "ancient times," also entails elements of paradigm clash against the central logic rooted in the more recent modern history of international politics led by Europe and the United States.

In looking into the future of the U.S.-China strategic relationship, therefore, one would need to ask how and to what extent these deeply seated Chinese sentiments, which form an important component of Chinese nationalism mixed with the confidence coming from its spectacular rise, may or may not be mitigated by the elements of liberal internationalism which are also obvious in the Chinese debates and in some of its behaviors.

On the basis of the examination of U.S.-China relations, I will also address how Japan could and should be looked at in a broader context of evolving East Asian security. Any argument that treats Japan, consciously or unconsciously, as if it were an equal strategic player vis-à-vis the United States and China is deadly wrong as an analysis and does not provide any relevant clue to the understanding of Japanese thinking and behaviors. By extension, this fallacy of the analysis on Japan is a source of confusion in the discussions of U.S.-Japan relations, Japan-China relations, and U.S.-China-Japan relations in a broader East Asian context.

In brief, Japan is a lesser strategic player to the United States and

China, and there is no realistic aspiration whatsoever among the central decision-makers to become an equal. What may sound like an expression of such aspiration in the domestic debates, if any, is far from being an indication of Japanese strategy but simply an aspect of complex domestic environment in which de-facto “middle-power” strategy is being conceptualized and implemented.

A brief discussion of two scenarios emanating from the rise of China is first in order.

Two Scenarios

There are two trends or scenarios brought about by the rise of China, or to be more precise, by the behaviors of a rising China. One is the scenario of a rising China seeking an alternative (China-centered) international order, if only regionally, to the one led and managed primarily by the United States and other advanced democracies. The other trend is a rising China attempting to modify some rules and institutional arrangements as a member of and from within the existing international order, which I would like to call a “liberal international order” or LIO in this paper.

Actual Chinese behaviors indicate that its rise indeed entails elements causing both of these trends/scenarios. On the one hand, Chinese thinking and behaviors in the domain of traditional security accelerate the first trend, where the historically nurtured “anti-West” sentiments and a strong sense of pride in its ascendance combine to strengthen peculiar Chinese nationalism. Concrete issues and behaviors in this domain include the highest priority accorded to national territorial integrity and sovereignty claims toward the East China Sea and the South China Sea, where the Chinese logic of legitimacy goes back into “ancient times.” Also relevant here is the strong sense of rivalry and competition with the United States

manifest in the PLA's military doctrine and national security strategy.

At the same time, however, today's spectacular rise of China is indeed a result of China fully taking advantage of the liberal international order (LIO) led by the United States and other industrialized democracies, particularly since Deng Xiaoping's open door and reform policies. This implies, at least theoretically, that in order for China to continue to rise and tackle associated problems both domestically and internationally, it will continue to have to live within the existing LIO, and even craft its grand strategy according to this second scenario¹. This does not mean, however, that China will be sitting in international meetings and debates quietly. On the contrary, it will fully mobilize its immense pools of intellectual resources and knowledge about international rules and mechanisms, and will challenge the old guards of LIO to rectify what may look "unfair" in the eyes of the Chinese.

In the end, the mainstream of the Chinese diplomatic behaviors will not divert from the second trend of global affairs, while elements stimulating the first trend will also never go away including its sovereignty and territorial claims and highly geopolitical considerations.

The challenge for the rest of us in East Asia including Japan is to work with China effectively in order to encourage the future course of the rise of China toward the second trend and to deal with Chinese strong self-assertions there, while guarding against Chinese unilateralism with its might in the first trend of security development in the region. This is a complex task for all East Asian nations that cannot be achieved fully without consolidating security relations both with the United States and between themselves.

In this overall context, Japan-ASEAN relations have huge uncultivated potentials in leading a way toward a better East Asia amid the

¹ Wang Jisi, "China's Search for a Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2011)

historic rise of China. I will come back to this point later.

Strategic Coexistence between the United States and China

As stated at the outset, the strategic relationship between the United States and China could be described as the two great powers having “different dreams in the same bed.” Both need strategic co-existence with each other to tackle their own agenda, but their long-term strategic visions run parallel to each other. The basic differences will continue to exist in the domain of long-term military strategies of Pentagon and PLA, as well as in terms of the so-called universal values including democracy and human rights. Because of these fundamental differences, the Taiwan factor will remain a most difficult issue, albeit with ups and downs, between Beijing and Washington.

In more recent months, Chinese high-handed approaches to the sovereignty issue of the South China Sea as well as the East China Sea including the dispute with Japan over the Senkaku islands have heightened the tension of the similar nature. The Chinese claim that its sovereignty over these territories is obvious since “ancient times” and the possibility of using military means if necessary are nothing but the manifestations of its urge for a traditional China-centered world order, and thus entails elements of paradigm clash, a manifestation of the first trend mentioned above.

Actually, some Chinese behaviors and thinking imply that PLA may be prepared for the possibility of an eventual strategic clash with the United States. In turn, the United States is also aware of such a scenario and prepares itself for it. A recent case in point is the position expressed by the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, where the Pentagon expressed a concern about China’s expanding military capabilities that might deny U.S. forces’

access to East Asia².

As stated in the above, however, the U.S.-China relationship in its totality is a typical case of strategic coexistence between great powers, which is in essence competitive but will remain cooperative in the foreseeable future out of necessity. In a way, precisely because their strategic preferences are firm, long-term, and tend to point parallel directions, they tend to seek to avoid confrontation and build cooperation.

Recent Evolution of U.S.-China Relations

In retrospect, for instance, despite the fact that the Bush administration in principle conceptualized China as a strategic competitor when it came into office in 2001, it began the efforts to create a relationship of strategic coexistence with China soon after its inauguration. The 9.11 incident in 2001 proved to create a new foundation for such relationship.

Under these circumstances, the United States has come to define China as a stake-holder in the current and future international system³. This was a step forward from the previous discourse on the U.S. China policy, which had tended to be preoccupied with the dichotomy between engagement and containment. Engagement and containment approaches had one thing in common; both treated China as an outsider of the U.S.-led international system. In contrast, the stake-holder argument has assumed that China is already in the system.

Chinese responses to the stake-holder thesis were cautious. China

² Specifically, the QDR states, “Anti-access strategies seek to deny outside countries the ability to project power into a region, thereby allowing aggression or other destabilizing actions to be conducted by the anti-access power.” The United States Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (February 2010), p. 31.

³ Robert Zoellick, “Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?” Remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, September 21, 2005, http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_7358-544-1-30.pdf.

initially concluded that it is essentially not much different from the engagement approach, but eventually decided to take up the challenges and play the game in the U.S.-led international system. China, however, also made up its mind not to play the game according to the rules set up by the United States necessarily. The U.S. response to this counter-challenge by China was Fred Bergsten's argument of G-2, recognizing both the fundamental differences with China and the necessity to work with China in tackling international agenda⁴.

The China policy of the Obama administration has also inclined toward using multilateral forums in dealing with the challenges by China. In principle, this approach presupposes China as an insider of LIO led by the United States. There is also evidence to believe that liberal internationalists in China are likely to tread the course toward becoming a responsible member of the international community. After all, as stated above, today's spectacular rise of China is the product of LIO, and given mounting problems that China will continue to face domestically in years ahead, the Chinese leadership will not be able to manage them properly without continuing to coexist with LIO.

In Need of an Alternative Perspective to Japan

This confusion in the security profile of Japan has long been a source of confusion in the discussions of East Asian security including the subject matter of the this paper, U.S.-China relations. Japan's actual security profile, still fundamentally constrained by the legacies of the war of aggression since the 1930s both externally and domestically, is much closer to that of a "middle power," which makes the choice of the alliance with the United States a must as the foundation of its security policy. Seeking

⁴ C. Fred Bergsten, "A Partnership of Equals," *Foreign Affairs*. (July/August, 2008)

strategic independence, let alone “re-militarization,” is totally out of the radar screen of Japanese strategic debates and actual policies, and Japan has invested its resources in typical areas of “middle-power” diplomacy including non-proliferation and arms control at international organizations and economic assistance to facilitate regional integration and human security⁵.

The postwar records of Japan’s de facto middle power diplomacy have been most conspicuous in its policies toward Southeast Asia, where it has intentionally avoided entanglement in power politics and sought the role of a facilitator in the sub-region’s economic development and integration for a long period of time. Here, Japan’s diplomatic approach shares some fundamental attribute with that of Southeast Asia, which seeks to cope with “strategic changes associated with China’s rise and U.S. preponderance,” while struggling “to maintain autonomy and to avoid overdependence on great powers.”⁶

In this connection, the conventional wisdom to look at Japan as one of the “external powers” including China and the United States has blinded many observers to the structural basis of equality between Southeast Asia and Japan, and accordingly to a more relevant perspective to the regional role of Japan and by extension East Asian security.

The same confusion exists in relations to Northeast Asian security over the Korean Peninsula. The Korean preoccupation with a geopolitical rivalry between China and Japan over the Korean Peninsula, for instance, is nothing but a myth, even as a future scenario. Here, the traditional Korean perspective that the Peninsula is encircled by the “four great powers” is a source of confusion, which is a breeding ground of a typical conspiracy theory

⁵ Yoshihide Soeya, *Nihon-no Midoru Pawa Gaiko [Japan’s Middle-Power Diplomacy]* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 2005).

⁶ Eveline Goh, “Great Powers and Hierarchical Order: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies,” *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2007/08), p. 140.

about the Japanese intentions and behaviors.

By the same token, this geopolitical perspective is the most fundamental obstacle blocking otherwise naturally cooperative relations between Japan and South Korea. One would realize the actual base of cooperation between Tokyo and Seoul, if one visualizes a more realistic geopolitical landscape of Northeast Asia security, where South Korea and Japan are being surrounded by the three strategically independent “great powers,” i.e., the United States, China and Russia.

For obvious reasons, both positive and negative, it is natural that the United States should continue to place a premium on its strategic relationship with China, in designing its foreign policies globally as well as toward East Asia. Here, Japan and ASEAN (as well as South Korea) are essentially equal partners, not as a political slogan, but in the true sense of the word, while its relations with China should remain complex, embracing imperatives for both cooperation and concern.

Concluding Remarks

There should be no disagreement that the future of regional integration in East Asia depends fundamentally on the stability of the U.S.-China strategic relationship. The role of the rest of the East Asian countries, including Japan, is to contribute to its stability by leading a process of deeper regional cooperation. Here, important initiatives should be taken by regional “middle powers” which should create solid infrastructure of stable regional order through the accumulation of concrete records of mutual cooperation. These achievements should of course be acceptable to both the United States and China, which should contribute to the stability of the strategic relationship between the two “small universes” across the Pacific.