

第九章 US-CHINA-JAPAN TRILATERAL RELATIONS — A VIEW FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Introduction

The ongoing strategic transformation in East Asia, with the rise of China as the key driver, has brought about new strategic challenges to many countries in the region. Questions, for example, are being raised with regard to the nature of China's rise and its implications for the region and indeed the world. The future role and status of the United States (US), and indeed its primacy, in the region is being re-assessed. The evolving regional order and security architecture in East Asia has become a central issue often discussed by policy-makers and analysts. Regional powers and players – such as South Korea, Australia, Indonesia and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – have begun to ponder what the future trajectory might look like and have expressed their concerns about future relations among the major powers within the changing strategic environment in East Asia. The future relations among three major powers – the US, China and Japan – constitutes one important aspect of such concern.

This essay assesses the evolving US-China-Japan trilateral relations within the context of strategic transformation in East Asia and its implications for ASEAN's attempts at promoting cooperative security in the region. It argues that the rise of China, which serves as the key driver behind the ongoing strategic transformation, has changed the dynamics of the US-China-Japan triangular

relationship. While some aspects of that change could result in a more competitive relationship between China and Japan and between the US and China, there are grounds to believe that cooperative patterns of relationship could also prevail among the three powers. In that context, ASEAN-driven cooperative security and community-building processes could still serve as a useful platform for creating a conducive environment for cooperative interactions not only among the US, China and Japan, but also between the three major powers and other middle and smaller powers in the region.

China's Rise as a Key Driver

Undoubtedly, China occupies a central place in many nations' foreign policy agendas. Since it overtook Japan as the world's second largest economy in 2010, it has become increasingly clear that China would soon achieve its strategic aspiration of becoming a great power (*daguo*). Indeed, China's rapid rise as an economic powerhouse and military power has reinforced the country's centrality in regional and global politics. It serves as an important catalyst for ongoing power shift in East Asia, creates new strategic uncertainties, and raises delicate foreign policy questions and choices for regional countries. Perceptions of the nature of China's rise vary from one place to another. For some, the rise of China could potentially threaten the existing international and regional order. For others, China's rise brings about political and economic opportunities waiting to be tapped.

As China continues to enjoy the fruits of economic development and high economic growth (9.1 percent in 2005, 11.9 percent in 2008, and 9.1 percent in 2010), it is natural that the expansion of wealth would also have an impact on

China's overall comprehensive national strength (*zhonghe guoli*). First, China's military would continue to grow commensurate with its economy. The growth in economic power has made it possible for China to allocate its newly-acquired wealth to modernising and developing its military capabilities. Indeed, within the Asia-Pacific context, China is not only an economic powerhouse but a military power as well. Second, China has also demonstrated that it is now in the position to wield impressive soft power, primarily in the form of growing political and diplomatic influence, as a rising great power (*daguo*). Third, the growing importance of China as both an economic and military power has also presented an opportunity for Beijing to consolidate its diplomatic and political influence in the region. With the increase in both hard and soft power, China has now become a nation with a strong sense of confidence and nationalism. These developments clearly have the potential to bring about the most important regional power shift since the end of the Second World War, with both positive and negative implications for the region.

It is normal that, as its power rises, China wants greater recognition and more respect. However, the rise of China could present a problem if Beijing *demand*s such recognition and respect through the use of pressure by employing its economic wealth and military might. Indeed, there is still the question whether the increases of its defense budget for the last 17 years are congruent with the strategy for a peaceful rise. Part of this could be understood as a guarantee of Taiwan reunification, but the qualitative nature of the acquisition might not necessarily match the threat it might be facing. It also is a fact that China is already a nuclear power with many IRBMs and ICBMs, and questions arise about its intentions for

those new arms acquisitions. The rapid modernisation of China's navy, accompanied by a gradual but certain shift in naval strategy from "offshore defense" to "blue water defense," would give China the ability to project its military power and conduct operations between the area it calls the "first island chain" (connecting the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan and the Philippines) and the "second island chain" (connecting the Bonin Islands and Guam). China's air force also plans to expand its mission from air defense operations to air and space defense operations. Combined with China's tendency to shy away from the question of transparency, China's military build-up has become a major cause for concern among regional states.¹

As its economic and military power increases, there are grounds to suggest that Beijing's policy towards East Asia is also becoming increasingly assertive and aggressive. China, for example, has begun to assert its independence in global affairs and in the international arena more forcefully. Within the East Asian context, China has become more aggressive in asserting its claims in a number of areas disputed by other countries. The most recent cases are the incidents in the South China Sea between China and Vietnam (and also the Philippines) and between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands. In this latter case with Japan, the banning of rare earth exports to Japan clearly shows China's willingness to use its economic advantage as an instrument of power in order to achieve political goals. More importantly, the case also demonstrates how the forces of nationalism in a more confident China could easily force China's government to resort to coercive measures in dealing with its neighbours.²

It is still far from clear what China's long-term intentions and objectives would be. There is no guarantee that in the future an economically and militarily

powerful China would continue to be a *status quo* power. There is also no guarantee that China would not pursue a revisionist foreign policy agenda. The concern with China's future role relates first and foremost to the question of how China is going to use its new stature and influence in achieving its national interests and objectives in the region. While China has not yet expressed an intention to replace the US as the hegemonic leader in East Asia, the growing influence of China has already limited the influence of the US in the region. This concern is evident among ASEAN countries. Despite tremendous improvements in ASEAN-China relations, various problems continue to persist in bilateral contexts. At the regional level, ASEAN would not want to see a China that seeks to dominate the region and define its relations with ASEAN states in terms of competition with other major powers.

The rise of China presents even a more difficult challenge to itself. As its power and international stature rise, China, too, is faced with delicate policy choices. China undoubtedly wants to ensure that its rise to great power status would not be hindered. However, doing so in a way that would not alarm both regional and extra-regional powers is not an easy task. Indeed, it has been noted that "one defining tension in Hu's foreign policy agenda is to find a balance between pursuing international influence and downplaying its aspirations to being a global power."³ Such a dilemma is at the root of, and reflected in, China's ambiguous and at times inconsistent policies towards East Asia. Consequently, as China itself is still uncertain about the directions and implications of its rise, both regional and extra-regional powers have to cope with strategic uncertainty as a key feature of the emerging regional order in East Asia.

In managing this dilemma, China embarks upon a strategy of peaceful rise in its foreign policy aimed at ensuring its neighbours that the rise of China to global power status would not pose a threat to the region. Managing and improving bilateral relations with neighbouring countries, especially in Southeast Asia, become key priorities for China. Beijing is also seeking to immerse itself within the evolving regional order in East Asia by actively participating in regional multilateral and bilateral cooperative processes. Previously suspicious of any multilateral initiative, China is now an enthusiastic participant in many regional cooperation and undertakings. China is an important member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). China – together with Japan and South Korea – also plays an important role in the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) cooperation framework, seeking to forge closer relations between the 10 ASEAN member states and the three Northeast Asian countries.

Implications of China's Rise for US-China-Japan Trilateral Relationship

The rise of China, and its implications for the power balance in the region, has changed the dynamics of the most important strategic triangle in the region, namely the US-China-Japan relationship. For its part, Japan is also anxious about the policy direction that China might take in the future, the rapid modernisation of China's military, and the lack of transparency in the process of its military build-up. The National Defence Programme Guideline (NDPG), for example, notes that "China has been expanding and intensifying its maritime activities in the surrounding waters. These trends, together with insufficient transparency over China's military forces and its security policy, are of concern for the regional and

global community.”⁴ Writing in 2008, Hitoshi Tanaka noted that “by 2030 China’s economy will not only have caught up but will be several times larger than Japan’s. It is unclear whether the Japanese people, who have long enjoyed their country’s reputation as the world’s second most powerful economy, are ready to accept these changes.”⁵ In other words, as a result of the ongoing power shift, the question of how to respond to the challenge posed by the rise of China constitutes a central issue in Japan’s strategic and policy thinking.

The changing reconfiguration of power in East Asia has also been accompanied by growing perceptions in the region that Japan is a declining power. Some even believe that Japan is a nation in the process of a sure descent into irrelevance. It has been asserted, for example, that “Japan has been on the sidelines of Asian regionalism. It has not played the role nor had the influence that its economic strengths would otherwise allow as the most developed and richest country in the region.”⁶ These perceptions are certainly not helpful, if not dangerous, to the collective need to manage the power shift peacefully. The region needs Japan as much as it needs China. The role of Japan, despite being in deep domestic political and economic crisis, should not be overlooked. Its presence, and active role, is still very much needed if the East Asian community-building process is to move ahead. Yet, as China’s rise has intensified Japan’s concerns, it is not immediately clear how the relationship between the two countries would evolve in the years to come. For one, there are signs that Japan is seriously rethinking its position in the region.

There is also the challenge of uncertainties in China-US relations. If the competitive elements of strategic relations between the US and China become more

dominant, this would open up the possibility for conflict between the two major powers in the region, and a possibility that Japan would also be drawn into it would not be good news for the region. One important issue in this regard is US policy on Taiwan, and the possibility of the use of force by China to unify Taiwan. Indeed, if such a scenario became were to become a reality, ASEAN would face a difficult choice. ASEAN countries believe that good relations between the US and China are critical for the region's stability and prosperity. ASEAN might have to face a new delicate game of power politics if the US decides to pursue a containment policy against China. Judging from current trends in US foreign policy, it is not surprising if Washington would pursue a policy of maintaining its primacy in the region. Here, ASEAN member states are confronted with the challenge of avoiding themselves from being trapped in a possible rivalry between the US and China.

Indeed, the uncertainties in US-China and China-Japan relations pose a delicate policy problem for ASEAN. If China and Japan are unable to resolve their problems, the ASEAN states would face a tremendous challenge in positioning themselves between the two powers. In this regard, if the competitive relations between China and Japan are to become heightened, ASEAN would face a strategic dilemma. On the one hand, Japan is at the moment still the most important partner for ASEAN states. On the other hand, the strategic importance of China has increasingly grown, and within the next 10-15 years, Chinese influence would be felt in a much concrete way. In other words, ASEAN confronts the challenge of maintaining good and friendly relations with both Japan and China, whose future relationship might also include competitive elements. As a consequence of China's

rise and China's diplomatic offensive, ASEAN – as well as its individual member states – finds itself in a delicate balancing act within Beijing and Tokyo on the one hand and between China and the US on the other. Finding the right balance in managing this dilemma is not an easy task for ASEAN.

ASEAN's Response

ASEAN's position within the emerging regional power configuration – especially within the triangle relationship between the US, Japan, and the PRC – has increasingly become more problematic. Moreover, the multiple threats and complex security problems facing ASEAN clearly require the Association to strengthen its institutions and embark upon a new course of consolidation. During the 9th Summit in 2003 in Bali, Indonesia, ASEAN leaders agreed to transform the Association into a security community by 2020. In the Bali Concord II, ASEAN leaders affirm that the ASEAN Security Community (ASC) “is envisaged to bring ASEAN's political and security cooperation to a higher plane to ensure that countries in the region live at peace with one another and with the world at large in a just, democratic and harmonious environment”.⁷ The ASC is expected to strengthen ASEAN's commitment to resolving conflicts and disputes through a depoliticised means of legal instruments and mechanisms, and through other peaceful means. The agreement reflects ASEAN's commitment and awareness on consolidating itself as a collective entity. Indeed, if realised, this initiative would contribute greatly to the strengthening of ASEAN. However, the challenge still lies in the implementation of the ASC and in the commitment of all ASEAN member states to the idea.⁸

ASEAN has also taken steps to restructure and strengthen its extra-mural relations. At the “bilateral level”, ASEAN’s strategy has been carried out in three main ways. First, in dealing with the rise of China, ASEAN has moved to forge a closer relationship with Beijing through a “strategic” partnership in the hope that China can be locked into a web of cooperative relations. Second, ASEAN has also strengthened its relationship with Japan through the framework of a “dynamic and enduring partnership” that has now moved beyond traditional areas of cooperation (trade, ODA, and industry and technology) to include deeper political and security cooperation. Third, ASEAN continues to see the US as an indispensable power for regional security and prosperity, and seeks to strengthen ASEAN-US cooperation and relations. These three elements of ASEAN’s strategy would provide a solid foundation for ASEAN’s relationships with the three major powers.

At the regional level, ASEAN has also taken a two-pronged approach. At one level, ASEAN continues to promote the merits and importance of security multilateralism in East Asia. ASEAN believes that a multilateral approach would be more realistic and more beneficial to everyone in the region, both regional and extra-regional players. With ASEAN’s role as a primary driving force, the ARF serves as the only multilateral forum for security cooperation in the region, involving not only Southeast Asian, South Asian, and Northeast Asian countries, but more importantly also Russia and the US. ASEAN also expects that the ARF could serve as a constructive venue for major powers – especially China, Japan, and the US – to engage each other in a spirit of cooperation. Indeed, for ASEAN, the ARF – despite its shortcomings – serves as a venue through which its security interests, and the interests of extra-regional powers, could be best attained. It is

also a venue within which the notion of ASEAN's centrality can be articulated, albeit in a diplomatic way.

At the other level, ASEAN has also supported the idea of an East Asian regionalism. This process began in Kuala Lumpur in December 2005 with the inaugural East Asian Summit (EAS). The EAS is meant to “promote community building in this region” and “form an integral part of the evolving regional architecture.”⁹ It was also agreed during the first EAS that the aim of the EAS is to promote “peace, stability and economic prosperity in East Asia” through a partnership between ASEAN and other participants in the EAS. Through this undertaking, the EAS participants pledged to foster strategic dialogue, promote development and deepen cultural understanding.¹⁰ In this context, the EAS is expected to serve as an important mechanism for promoting the process of East Asian community-building. This process, which began without US participation, has now been redesigned with the inclusion of the US and Russia as two new members.

Two key questions remain, however. First, can the existing multilateral frameworks in East Asia function as mechanisms for managing the new emerging regional order in East Asia? Second, do the existing institutions provide a guarantee for a stable regional order characterised by a power shift? These are the two basic questions facing all powers in the region, small, medium and big, within the ongoing power shift in East Asia and its implications for the US-China-Japan triangular relationship. The future role of these three major powers in East Asia – and indeed the role of ASEAN – needs to be framed within these two questions. Until regional countries are able to create a better alternative, the existing

ASEAN-driven multilateral frameworks – such as the ARF, the APT, and the EAS – need to be utilised to provide a framework for positive interaction among the major powers. After all, the future of East Asia depends on cooperative trilateral relations among the US, China and Japan.

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- 2 On the rise of Chinese nationalism, see, Christopher R. Hughes, *Chinese Nationalism in the Global Era* (London: Routledge, 2006).
- 3 Suisheng Zhao, “Chinese Foreign Policy in Hu’s Second Term: Coping With Political Transition Abroad,” *Foreign Policy Research Institutes E-Notes*, 10 May 2008, at <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/20080510.zhao.chineseforeignpolicyhu.html>
- 4 Japan’s Ministry of Defence, *The National Defence Programme Guideline for FY 2011 and Beyond*, available at http://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/d_policy/pdf/guidelinesFY2011.pdf
- 5 Hitoshi Tanaka, “A Japanese Perspective on the China Question,” *JCIE East Asia Insights: Toward Community Building*, vol 3, no. 2, May 2008, p. 2, available at <http://www.jcie.org/researchpdfs/EAI/3-2.pdf>
- 6 Simon S. C. Tay, *Asia Alone: The Dangerous Post-Crisis Divide from America* (Singapore: John Wiley, 2010), p.81.
- 7 The Bali Concord II, signed in Bali, Indonesia, by ASEAN leaders on 7 October 2003.
- 8 See, Carolina Hernandez, “The Current State of ASEAN Political-Security Cooperation: Problems and Prospects in Forming an ASEAN Security Community,” paper presented at The 4th U.N.-ASEAN Conference on *Conflict Prevention, Conflict Resolution, and Peace Building in Southeast Asia: ASEAN Security Community and the U.N.*, Jakarta, 23-25 February 2004.
- 9 *Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the East Asia Summit*, Kuala Lumpur, 14 December 2005.
- 10 *Ibid.*