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IMPROVED CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS CONFUSING TO THE JAPANESE

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The relationship between China and Taiwan has been rapidly improving since the China-friendly administration of President Ma Ying-jeou was inaugurated in Taiwan in May 2008. In contrast, the Ma administration's relations with Japan have always been fraught with concerns on the part of Japan, including that of Taiwan being swallowed up into China and Ma's latent anti-Japanese sentiment. Meanwhile, suspicions have been lingering in some

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circles in China and Taiwan that improved cross-Strait relations are not welcomed by Japan. What on earth do improved cross-Strait relations and the Ma administration's Japan policy mean for Japan? What are Japan's policy options? This essay attempts to answer these questions by first comparing the Ma administration with its predecessor.

Let's examine the strained relations between China and Taiwan under the presidency of Chen Shui-bian from the following three aspects: crisis, power balance and economic interests. Firstly, it can be pointed out that Chen's China policy could have destabilized relations with China, even though concern over a possible crisis was not imminent. Secondly, since the power balance in East Asia was maintained by continued cross-Strait confrontation, Japan did not have to worry about a sudden change in the status quo. Thirdly, Japan was unable to envision the future of economic relations between China and Taiwan due to the lack of bilateral official channels between the two, although their economic ties were rapidly deepening as a matter of practice.

Ma's succession of Chen has improved Taiwan's relations with mainland China, eliminating Japan's concern about a cross-Strait crisis. However, it has also heightened the prospects for a shift in the regional balance of power toward China. Meanwhile, deepening cross-Strait economic ties have made it easier for Japanese companies investing in Taiwan to envision future prospects.

In short, of the three aspects mentioned above, Japan's utmost concern is on the shift in the regional balance of power in favor of China, which is caused mainly by the Taiwanese tilt toward China. The United States takes a totally different stance from Japan on this. Since the US is directly responsible for Taiwan's security under the Taiwan Relations Act, it is more sensitive to the danger of a possible cross-Strait crisis than Japan. On the other hand, as a superpower outside the region, the US is less sensitive to the regional balance of power. Moreover, the US is dealing with tough issues such as the war on terrorism and nuclear developments in Iran and North Korea, which always require Chinese cooperation. Therefore, the US tends to take the start of the Ma administration and improved cross-Strait relations as a positive sign.

With regards to Ma's policy toward Japan, there is no question that it is

of a friendly nature. In the first place, the Japanese and the Taiwanese share very strong feelings of friendship, and no leader can adopt policies that would challenge such public sentiment. Furthermore, Ma has singled out Japan as a country with which to form a “special partnership,” and organized related events designed to consolidate the partnership. However, his mishandling of a collision between a Taiwanese fishing boat and a Japan Coast Guard patrol vessel that occurred in the waters off the disputed Senkaku Islands, also known as the Tiaoyutai Islands in Taiwan, soon after his inauguration as president escalated the problem and caused anti-Japanese feeling within Taiwan to rise to the worst level in the past two decades.

How could such conflicting things happen in Taiwan? The answer lies not so much in Ma’s personality as in the fact that the Ma administration is based on a power structure that is totally different from Chen’s. The Ma administration lacks strong affinity for Japan at its power center and its support base includes a political force that harbors strong anti-Japanese sentiments. The force, embracing anti-Japanese forces in China and Hong Kong as well, appeals to nationalism by tactically utilizing the mass media and tends to politicize difficult problems such as the dispute over the Senkaku Islands. That is why, even though Ma regards Japan as strategically important, he cannot sooth anti-Japanese sentiments on the island, causing him to occasionally take a hardline stance on Japan.

The Japanese concern over the Ma administration derives from two factors: the regional power shift and the administration’s power structure. Yet at the same time, there are views that welcome the passage of a cross-Strait crisis and deepening commercial ties with Taiwan. Ma has embraced a pro-Japan policy, but stumbled on the handling of the Senkaku issue. It would be more accurate to say that the Japanese are puzzled by these confusing messages from Taiwan. Human beings are creatures that find it difficult to adapt to rapid changes. Japan is still trying to find a satisfactory answer as to how to adapt to the rapidly changing East Asian order, in which China and Taiwan are drawing closer amid the rapid rise of China.

What policy options does Japan have? As long as China’s rise is

peaceful, an outright policy to balance it would be completely outdated. We need to take a more sophisticated approach. Firstly, while welcoming stabilized relations between China and Taiwan, we need to keep reminding China to improve military transparency and not to rely on military might. It has been less than five years since China adopted its de-facto status quo policy, exemplified by the Anti-Secession Law, and it is not yet clear whether this will become Beijing's settled policy.

Secondly, in light of the upgraded cross-Strait relations, Japan should seek to upgrade relations with China and Taiwan respectively. For example, the signing of an economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA) between Beijing and Taipei could be an opportunity for Japan to strengthen the existing frameworks for tightening economic ties both with China and Taiwan. Given the increasing direct contact between Chinese and Taiwanese authorities, Japan may consider increasing similar contacts with Taiwan on a needs basis. Improved relations between China and Taiwan will in fact offer an opportunity for Japan to improve its relations with China and Taiwan. Japan does not need to stand on the sidelines to observe the improving bilateral relations.

Thirdly, Japan must avoid the erosion of its comprehensive national power and work to strengthen it. At the same time, it needs to maintain and develop a stable and strong relationship with the United States. If Japan continues its efforts to build an attractive nation, maintain sufficiently strong power, and increase the number of friendly and cooperative nations, that would reduce the level of perplexity felt by the Japanese regardless how much the power shift toward China accelerates or how many times Taiwan's administration changes. 

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