

The Triangle of Japan, South Korea and the United States in Northeast Asia:

A Japanese Quasi-Constructivist Perspective

By Inoguchi Takashi

■ South Korea at the Center?

KOREA was long called the Hermit Kingdom by Westerners. However, the time has gone forever for Korea to remain as such, and the world has changed. More importantly, Korea has changed. South Korea is ranked ninth in the world in terms of GNP. The country should be at the center of the world, at least in Northeast Asia. Geographically, the Korean peninsula is located between Japan and China. In terms of business transactions, Incheon and Pusan, whose combined tonnage of loads registers among the top 10 of world airports and ports, are in fact located between Beijing (Tianjin) and Tokyo (Yokohama-Chiba). Being a great nation, South Korea must combine the strategy of its competitive renaissance in the world market with eventual unification with North Korea. One way is to functionally link the South and the North with South Korea's development/humanitarian assistance and direct

investment in North Korea, which is welcomed in principle by Kim Jong-il's cautious reform and crisis diplomacy focused on the survival of himself and his regime. Another option is for South Korea to conduct massive trade with and direct investment in China. China's peaceful development is most welcome. China's supply of food and energy to North Korea is most welcome, too. Now that the North has ceased to be a great threat to South Korea, the South has started to welcome the reduction of the US military presence on the Korean peninsula while the United States has started to look at Seoul as if it were looking at another Pyongyang. Yet Seoul needs Washington to conduct its self-assigned role as a balancer. In a similar vein Seoul needs Tokyo to orchestrate its unification policy since Tokyo is most likely to be designated by Pyongyang to be a primary burden sharer of a born-again North Korean nation rebuilding itself in a diplomatic normalization package.

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South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao (left to right) at the trilateral meeting in Laos on Nov. 29, 2004

■ Japan Dancing Without a Partner?

Japan always starts with its convincing defeat in 1945. Why did Japan fight against the allied powers during World War II without any confidence in its victory?

There three lessons here. First, Japan should get along with the hegemonic powers like the United States since 1945 and Great Britain before

1945. Second, Japan should not wage a war by disarming itself as much as possible. Third, Japan should maintain stable and friendly relations with its neighboring countries. As time changes, relative weight changes. Since September 11 the weight of lesson one has gone up visibly while those lessons two and three have gone down considerably. The argument is roughly as follows. Only the United States can and does provide security and safety. Leaning to one side is absolutely necessary when the hegemonic country feels isolated and dares in a unilateral direction. Loyalty rather than either voice or exit is Japan's policy under such a circumstance as it creates more space for Japan's freedom. Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's Pyongyang visits and the Japan-Iran petroleum accords did not elicit too much noise from the United States. Japan and Great Britain consistently supported the United States over the Iraq war while many other countries opposed it. Japan sent more than 600 troops to Samawah in southwestern Iraq. Koizumi was among the very few political leaders who met President George W. Bush at his ranch in Texas shortly after the war in Iraq. Their conversation contained few words with symbolic references to *High Noon* and Gary Cooper.

Now that the war is over, attention in the United States is slowly coming back to East Asia: not only to beef and renminbi but also to Taiwan and the Yasukuni issue. Worrisome to the United States is Japan leaning to one side – which is welcome anyway – but flying upward extolling seemingly “patriotic” words vis-à-vis the Korean peninsula and China and Taiwan. The United States wants to see Japan, South Korea and China all stable and friendly toward the United States and each other. But that is not necessarily the case. Leaning to one side seems to have given rise to the need for compensation, i.e., patriotism. Yet unreformed patriotism could be easily taken as the offense against the allied powers of an WWII, the beautification of war crimes and an

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insult to Japan's neighbors. The logic was made to the effect that the alliance with the United States is an answer to Japan's foreign policies for Asia and the United Nations. Its consequence is the nadir of Japan's relationship with its neighbors at least for the time being and the slowly rising apprehension in the United States that Japan, a most solid and reliable ally in East Asia, might not have the diplomatic finesse and political competence to help carry out the US foreign policy in the region and at the United Nations.

Once the United States distances itself from Japan, Japan will not be able to dance without a partner.

The United States Coming Back from the War

The days were gone when the United States kept its two war strategies whereby it can wage two wars at the same time. When it waged the war in Iraq, the other tense frontlines in the world needed to be kept calm. When the war is over, then closer attention to East Asia normally ensues. Since the Iraq war is over, the United States can easily become less restrained, especially in Congress. What's going on in Iran and North Korea, the two remaining members of the Axis of Evil. What's going on in the Taiwan Strait over which the "inscrutables" on both sides keep waging symbolic wars with sophisticated roughness?

The UN Conference on Disarmament ended its session to reexamine the Non-Proliferation Treaty with great disappointment. Meanwhile North Korea declared it had produced nuclear weapons and Iran asserted that it would emulate the "Japanese model" whereby plutonium is produced for peaceful purposes under the heavy monitoring of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

On the Taiwan issue, the number of missiles in Fujian Province in China has increased from 400 to more than 600 over the past two or three years. The Chinese Navy has been most active in



Koizumi Junichiro (left) and President George W. Bush in Texas on May 23, 2003

the Taiwan Strait, the East China Sea and the Western Pacific Ocean reaching deeper into Guam. Taiwanese leaders look more audacious and risk-taking in legislating domestic laws and attempting a national referendum, and thus virtually changing the Constitution. Since it is one of the canons of the US government not to allow either side to take actions that would lead directly to military clashes over the Taiwan strait, it has consolidated the alliance with Japan. The alliance has covered Taiwan from its very beginning but mostly rhetorically since the Japanese component was very weak and the country was much firmer on the one China principle than the United States until recently. With the two-by-two meeting of both foreign and defense ministers, Japan and the United States recognize their shared perception and concern about the Taiwan issue which now has teeth from both countries. Seeing all this and other events and statements about the Yasukuni issue and history textbooks, China has been alarmed by the concurrent movement in Japan about what China sees as Japan's beautification of war crimes, its global ambition in the United Nations and its befriending of Taiwan. The difficulty of keeping Japan, South Korea and China friendly with each other is symbolized by the three bilateral FTAs reached between

China and ASEAN, Japan and ASEAN and Korea and ASEAN. These three countries favor what might be called the ASEAN+1 instead of the officially existing entity the ASEAN+3. At any rate during the four years of the anti-terrorist wars, two fledgling nuclear powers, North Korea and Iran, seem to have been given birth. Simultaneously the arms buildup on both sides of the Taiwan Strait have been intensifying. In addition, Japan has been at odds with both South Korea and China with the difficult-to-understand Yasukuni-at-any-cost stance raging up.

Conclusion

Looking at each of the three countries in the triangle, it is easy to see some of the irregularities afflicting its leaders. It is my hope that the above admittedly crude quasi-constructivist exercise will help to reveal the bewildering oddities of some of their thinking and non-thinking and thereby help to reduce the otherwise unnecessary difficulties. **JS**

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