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Changing Faces of East Asian International Relations and the U.S.-China-Japan Triangular Relations*

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Abstract

This paper illustrates changes in East Asian international relations in the past two decades with emphasis on the role ASEAN and China played. ASEAN and China have helped to create the new international order of East Asia with ASEAN and China in its center. In the latter part, the author discusses U.S.-China-Japan triangular relations have a basis on which the three nations can work together to resolve the Taiwan issue.

Keywords: China, East Asia, International Order, ASEAN, Taiwan

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Introduction

How will the rise of the People's Republic of China (China) change international relations in the world and in Asia in the 21st century? This has been one of the most frequently asked questions since the rapid economic growth of China began to impress people in the world. In an effort to answer to the question, this paper illustrates changing faces of international relations in East Asia in the past two decades, focusing on key actors, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), China, the United States and Japan, and interactions among them. Sections 1 and 2 discuss increasingly growing roles of China and ASEAN in new international order in East Asia. China responded to the structural changes and managed to change its policies for the East Asian region in the mid-1990s, and China began to engage itself more actively than before in multilateral frameworks. China's policy changes, in reverse, have helped to bring China and ASEAN in the center of international order of East Asia. Section 3 takes a look at the U.S.-China-Japan triangular relations and inquires into the implications of Taiwan on the relations.

1. The New International Order of East Asia

International order in East Asia witnessed significant changes in the past two decades. With the Cold War coming to an end, expanding diplomatic relations among East Asian nations at the bilateral level and efforts to bring multilateral frameworks based in East Asia firm in place paved the way for new East Asian international order. In 1990 China normalized its relationship with Indonesia and Singapore, while the Republic of Korea (South Korea) established a formal relationship with the Soviet Union. In 1991 South Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) joined the United Nations simultaneously, and the next year China and South Korea established a formal relationship between the two. The beginning of APEC unofficial summit meetings in 1993 indicated the historic tide moving toward the integration of the Asia-Pacific region reached to a higher level. ASEAN in 1994 organized the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in order to provide opportunities with the foreign ministers of 17 nations in the Asia-Pacific region and the representative of EU to talk about security issues in the region. Two years later, ASEAN hosted the first ASEM meeting, the summit meeting among nations in Asia and Europe, in Bangkok in 1996. These developments helped to create an East Asia covered with multilateral and multi-layered regional frameworks and dialogue

opportunities in which ASEAN was supposed to play significant roles.¹⁾

In spite of great setbacks the Asian currency crisis of 1997-1998 brought to the region's economy, ASEAN has continued to pursue the integration of Southeast Asia, and has committed to expand multilateral frameworks on a broader basis with non-ASEAN actors since the late 1990s. ASEAN impressively expanded itself and strengthened the regional integrity. ASEAN, originally created in 1967 by 5 Southeast Asian nations (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand), added to its membership Brunei Darussalam in 1984, Viet Nam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and finally Cambodia in 1999. After more than 30 years since its foundation, ASEAN accomplished its goal to become a truly regional organization that included all the 10 nations in the Southeast Asian region (ASEAN 10). In 1997, ASEAN adopted ASEAN Vision 2020, which promised to establish "ASEAN Community" by 2020. In the same year, in an effort to accomplish that goal, ASEAN began to invite China, Japan and South Korea to official/unofficial summit conferences and related meetings of ministers (ASEAN+3). It has also hosted East Asian Summit meetings (ASEAN+3, India, Australia and New Zealand) three times since December 2005. On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the establishment of ASEAN, all the ASEAN nations signed the ASEAN Charter in November 2007.²⁾

The development of multilateral and multi-layered security frameworks in East Asia after the Cold War changed the region to a great extent. East Asia is becoming a region covered with security frameworks with ASEAN in the center. When one remembers that East Asia in the Cold War years was mainly covered with bilateral "hub and spokes" security arrangements (the "hub" being the United States), one needs to admit that this change is highly remarkable.

2. China Changes its East Asian Policies

Faced with China's rapidly growing economic and military power and regional disputes over territory and national borderlines involving China, states in East Asia in the early 1990s voiced growing concern that China might become a military threat and a destroyer of the regional international order. However, the views that portrayed China as a threat to the security of the neighboring nations seemed to have receded. What changed the

1) On the establishment of the ARF, see Michel Leifer, *The ASEAN Regional Forum: Extending ASEAN's Model* (ADELPHI PAPER #302) (Oxford University Press, 1996).

2) On the development of ASEAN, see David Martin Jones and Michael L. R. Smith, "Making Progress, Not Progress: ASEAN and the Evolving East Asian Regional Order," *International Security* 32: 1 (Summer 2007), pp. 148-184.

way the nations in the region look at China was China's policy changes. Responding to international structural changes at both global and regional levels after the Cold War, China has managed to adapt its policies for East Asia to the newly emerging international environment.

Changes in China's foreign policy were indicated in its new posture toward regional multilateral frameworks. China seemed to begin to engage itself to regional multilateral arrangements more sincerely in the late 1990s. At the 3rd working session of the ARF held in July 1996, China abandoned its previous position that a multilateral framework should not deal with territorial disputes, and agreed to set up a multilateral arrangement to discuss territorial disputes such as one over the Spratly Islands. China also proposed in the same meeting that additional measures should be taken to improve mutual inspection of military exercises conducted by member nations. In addition, China announced for the first time its new security concept (NSC), which emphasized "to conduct dialogue, consultation, and negotiation on an equal footing...to solve disputes and safeguard peace. Only by developing a new security concept and establishing a fair and reasonable new international order can world peace and security be fundamentally guaranteed."³⁾ These were clear signs that China would actively participate in multilateral institutions created and supported by ASEAN.

The Asian currency crisis of 1997-1998 marked another turning point for China to create better relations with ASEAN. China keenly understood that the economic prosperity of China was deeply related to that of other East Asian nations when the crisis hit the region. Acting upon this understanding, China never devalued its currency during the crisis, but offered low-interest loans and aid packages to some Southeast Asian nations, while the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was reluctant to respond to the crisis as bold as China did. The governments of Southeast Asian nations highly appreciated the responsible actions taken by the government of China during the crisis, and the behavior of China helped to create better images of itself among Southeast Asian states. On the other hand, the success of their responses to the crisis gave the leaders of China confidence as a regional leader. Thus, the Asian currency crisis of 1997-1998 brought a good opportunity to make a better relationship between China and ASEAN.⁴⁾

China moved to strengthen its ties with ASEAN. Eventually in 2002, five years after

3) 高木誠一郎「中国とアジア太平洋地域の多国間協力」田中恭子編『現代中国の構造変動 8 国際関係－アジア太平洋の地域秩序－』東京大学出版会、2001年、73-94頁。『朝日新聞』1996年7月24日（縮刷版）。*Southeast Asian Affairs 1996* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1996). Quotes are in David Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order," *International Security* 29: 3 (2004/2005), p. 69.

4) Shambaugh, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

China joined ASEAN+3 summit conferences, China and ASEAN signed four major agreements, including the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. At the summit meeting the next year, China signed ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, becoming the first non-ASEAN state to do so. On the same day, China and ASEAN signed the Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity. By signing the treaty and the declaration, China committed itself to the principles of nonaggression and noninterference, principles ASEAN had long advocated. These developments reflected the perception on the Chinese side that China's involvement in the multilateral institutions and building a friendly relationship with ASEAN would be China's interest. ASEAN, on the other hand, found it their interest to engage China in the rules of behavior ASEAN endorsed.⁵⁾

China's interests in "confidence building" with the ASEAN member states increased. At the ARF-Inter-Sessional meeting in November 2003, China presented a "concept paper" which proposed that various measures aimed at confidence building be taken. The concept paper indicated China's willingness to discuss security issues which it had been unwilling to do so previously in the ARF. China proposed to discuss such issues as military strategies and doctrines of member nations, the revolution in military affairs (RMA), and other related issues. ASEAN realized the importance of China's proposal and immediately agreed to it. As a result, high-ranking military officers from 24 ARF member states and dialogue partners met in November 2004 in Beijing to talk about security policies. This was an unprecedented conference within the ARF framework.⁶⁾

While it has been enhancing its ties with ASEAN, China earnestly engaged itself in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Six-Party Talks on the Korean Peninsula. The SCO was organized in 2001 with a permanent secretariat headquarters in Beijing by 6 member nations: China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. It mainly focused on the threat of terrorism, but expanded its scope to include economic cooperation.⁷⁾ China has played instrumental roles in the Six-Party Talks on the Korean Peninsula, too. Since August 2003, 6 nations (China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States) have occasionally met in Beijing with China as the chair nation. North Korea, which conducted nuclear tests in October 2006, on some conditions agreed to stop its nuclear weapons development programs in the Six-Party Talks in

5) Jones and Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 177-178; Shambaugh, *op. cit.*, p. 75. On this point, see also 青山瑠妙「中国の地域外交と東アジア共同体 — 多元的・重層的な地域協力関係の構築 —」山本武彦・天児慧編「東アジア共同体の形成1 新たな地域形成」岩波書店、2007年、93-119頁。

6) Shambaugh, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-88.

7) 青山「前掲論文」。

February 2007.

Since the late 1990s China's policies for East Asia have put more emphasis on enhancing its ties with nations in the region and engaging itself more actively to multilateral frameworks and to "confidence building" measures. Partly reflecting China's interest in balancing the influences of the United States in the region, thus China responded to the structural changes of East Asian international order and helped to underpin the new order.⁸⁾

3. U.S.-China-Japan Triangular Relations and the Unresolved Issue of Taiwan

Even though China and ASEAN have established friendlier relations than ever and East Asia has become a region covered with multilateral and multi-layered frameworks, still some security issues related to the difficult relationship between China and Taiwan, including the possibility of armed conflicts between the two nations with the United States militarily involved, are something the ARF and other existing multilateral frameworks cannot effectively resolve. This is partly because Taiwan is not a member of the ARF or any other frameworks ASEAN established (North Korea joined the ARF in 2000).⁹⁾ The Taiwan issue will remain unresolved for some time to come, and stay as a bone in the throat for states in the region, the United States, China and Japan in particular, whose triangular relations will shape the international order of East Asia in the 21st century to a great extent.

To the contrary to worries presented by some observers that serious conflicts might arise between rapidly rising China and the United States before long,¹⁰⁾ the leaders of China seem to assume that time is on their side, and they probably believe avoiding serious conflicts or war with the United States until China achieves the real "great power" status serves the best interest of the nation. As long as the first priority for China up to the year 2050 is to become an economically developed and civilized socialist nation, China would avoid serious conflicts or war with the United States until it accomplishes its national goal. This attitude of the Chinese leaders largely results from their acceptance of the U.S. hegemony as inevitable facts of life in the world in general and in the East Asian region

8) For China's balancing acts, see Evan S. Medeiros, "Strategic Hedging and the Future of Asia-Pacific Stability," *Washington Quarterly* 29: 1 (Winter 2005-06), pp. 145-167.

9) 松田康博「中台関係と国際安全保障」『国際政治』135号（『東アジアの地域協力と安全保障』）2004年、60-77頁。

10) Aaron L. Friedberg, "The Future of U.S.-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?" *International Security* 30: 2 (2005), pp. 7-45; David Shambaugh, "The New Strategic Triangle: U.S. and European Reactions to China's Rise," *Washington Quarterly* 28: 3 (2005), pp. 7-25.

in particular. They seem to assume that though the U.S. superiority would not last forever, the U.S. hegemony in the region will stay in the place for sometime.¹¹⁾

In fact, the United States and China have kept good records in their relations since 9/11, 2001. China wasted no time in indicating her willingness to support U.S. efforts in the “war on terrorism.” China not only supported to pass the United Nations resolutions which would allow the United States to conduct military operations in Afghanistan, but also gave pieces of information on terrorist activities in Afghanistan to the United States. After North Korea admitted in October 2002 its renewed efforts in developing nuclear weapons, the United States actively worked with China inside and outside of the Six-Party Talks to prevent North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons (Though it conducted nuclear tests in October 2006, North Korea agreed to halt its nuclear weapons development programs in February 2007). In addition, China, a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, was not opposed to the U.S. attacks on Iraq in March 2003.¹²⁾

The moment which highlighted the good relations between the two states came when the leaders of the United States and China seemed to agree that they would not welcome the independence of Taiwan. At the press conference on December 9, 2003 with PRC Prime Minister Wen Jiabao (温家宝) in the White House, U.S. President George W. Bush indicated the United States did not support the course Taiwan was taking at that time toward independence. “We oppose,” he stated, “any unilateral decision by either China or Taiwan to change the status quo.”¹³⁾ Wen Jiabao did not disagree. This was an unprecedented occasion on which the leaders of the two nations agreed to explicitly warn Taipei not to seek independence unilaterally.

Yet, the United States is increasingly concerned about the rapid development of the Chinese military power. In its report presented to Congress in March 2008, U.S. Department of Defense observed that “China’s expanding and improving military capabilities are changing East Asian military balances; improvements in China’s strategic capabilities have implications beyond the Asia-Pacific region.” However, it admitted that China had not yet acquired “the military capability to accomplish with confidence its political objectives on the [Taiwan] island.”¹⁴⁾

In preparing for contingencies that might arise in East Asia, the United States has en-

11) Jisi Wang, “China’s Search for Stability with America,” *Foreign Affairs* 84:5 (2005), pp. 39-48; Bijian Zheng, “China’s ‘Peaceful Rise’ to Great-Power Status,” *Foreign Affairs* 84: 5 (2005), pp. 18-24.

12) 秋田浩之『暗流－米中日外交三国誌』日本経済新聞社、2008年、125-144頁。

13) “President Bush and Premier Wen Jiabao Remarks to the Press” [Dec. 9, 2003]. Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/12/20031209-2.html>. For the background of the press conference, see 秋田『前掲書』、147-154頁。

14) *Military Power of the People’s Republic of China 2008* [March 2008], pp. 5, 43. Available at http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/china_military_report_08.pdf

hanced security ties with Japan since the end of the Cold War. In April 1996, one year after the publication of the so-called Nye Report, *U.S. Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region*, the United States and Japan “reconfirmed” their security relations, and expanded the scope of U.S.-Japan security cooperation from one focused on Far East to another one focused on the much larger Asia-Pacific region. The revised U.S.-Japan defense guidelines of 1997 aimed to give Japan a much more active role than ever in helping U.S. military activities in contingencies on the Korean peninsula and in the Taiwan Strait. They also stated that the scope of the U.S.-Japan security alliance would cover “situations in the areas surrounding Japan,” leaving the definition of the areas to be determined by “situational” terms rather than “geographic” terms.¹⁵⁾ The transformation of the U.S.-Japan security alliance alarmed China. President Jiang Zemin (江沢民) announced that China would be on “high alert”¹⁶⁾ immediately after the release of the revised U.S.-Japan defense guidelines.

In China’s perspective, the United States was something like “a cap in the bottle” to prevent Japan from becoming a military threat to East Asian nations again. This was the very reason China eventually came to see the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty as not a threat, but an asset for China. Yet, the transformation of U.S.-Japan security relations in the past 18 years might have changed this kind of Chinese perception of the U.S.-Japan relations.¹⁷⁾

U.S.-China-Japan triangular relations are likely to experience difficult time over the unresolved issue of Taiwan for years to come. As noted earlier, the United States and China came to share the view that Taiwan should not obtain independence “unilaterally.” The United States does not oppose the independence of Taiwan as a goal, but it opposes any change of the status quo of Taiwan by force. Therefore, as long as Taiwan remains in the status quo, the United States would live with it. Japan holds the same position on Taiwan. On the other hand, China maintains that Taiwan is an indispensable part of the nation, and it has aimed to bring Taiwan under its sovereignty since the communist party established the PRC government in 1949. China would not hesitate to use military forces to accomplish the national goal if necessary, and it might take a risk of facing a military show-

15) U.S. Department of Defense, *United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region* (U.S. Department of Defense, 1995). Available at www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/usa/hosho/kyoryoku.html. 梅林宏道「東北アジア安保－米軍支配から法の支配へ－」磯村早苗、山田康博編『いま戦争を問う－平和学の安全保障論－』法律文化社、2004年、243-271頁。

16) Quoted in Paul Midford, “China Views the Revised US-Japan Defense Guidelines: Popping the Cork?” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 4:1 (2004), p. 114; Thomas J. Christensen, “China, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and the Security Dilemma in East Asia,” *International Security* 23: 4 (1999), p. 63. See also, Wu Xinbo, “The End of the Silver Lining: A Chinese View of the U.S.-Japan Alliance,” *Washington Quarterly* 29: 1 (Winter 2005-06), pp. 119-130.

17) Midford, *op. cit.*; Xinbo, *op. cit.*

down with the United States for that purpose or stopping Taiwan becoming an independent state.

Nevertheless, China, the United States and Japan do have one thing on Taiwan in common: they all agree that there is only one China. They share the idea that the government in Beijing is the legitimate government of China, and not one in Taipei. Given this is the case, as long as the status of Taiwan remains the same, and China and Taiwan are satisfied with it, then no serious conflict is likely to occur among the three nations over Taiwan. What is needed is an international environment helpful to bring China and Taiwan to an agreement through peaceful means and process on the future relationship between the two. The United States and Japan may need some kind of caution to create such an environment, which reflects the new international order of East Asia.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to illustrate changes in East Asian international relations in the past two decades with emphasis on the role ASEAN and China played. The responses of ASEAN and China to the structural changes of East Asia caused by the end of Cold War and the expanded power of China, have helped to bring on a firm basis the emerging new international order of East Asia with ASEAN and China in its center. Rapidly rising China is likely to play the role of a status quo power in the international order, and not a destroyer of the order in East Asia in the first half of the 21st century, except when Taiwan tries to become an independent nation. This paper examined U.S.-China-Japan triangular relations, and discussed the likely basis on which the three nations can work together to resolve the Taiwan issue.

U.S.-China-Japan relations in the 21st century can be seen as a part of the changing world system. In the history of the modern world system, new hegemony replaced older ones over time. Hegemony was passed on from Portugal to Holland in the 17th century, then to the Great Britain in the 18th century, and to the United States in the 20th century. In each case when a new hegemon took over, the “hegemonic war” between an old hegemon and a challenger preceded the replacement of the old hegemon (interestingly enough, challengers have never taken the places of hegemony). U.S.-China-Japan relations in the 21st century may repeat this pattern of history of the modern world system.¹⁸⁾ The

18) Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); 猪口邦子『ポスト覇権システムと日本の選択』筑摩書房、1987年。田中明彦『世界システム』東京大学出版会、1989年。

future of East Asia is likely to be determined by the U.S.-China-Japan relations. If other nations consider China to be a “challenger” and treat China according to the perception, then China might really become one, which might not otherwise be the case.