



And now to Trilateralism

by Brad Glosserman and Bonnie Glaser

NANJING -- How good are China-Japan relations today? So good that the museum here to commemorate the 1937 massacre by Japanese Imperial Army soldiers is closed for renovation. That's remarkable since this is the 70th anniversary of the massacre and criticism of historical revisionism of Japan has been a staple of Chinese diplomacy for the past few years.

But the mood has shifted dramatically since Abe Shinzo became prime minister of Japan last September and he put restoration of good relations with China and South Korea at the top of his policy agenda. He has largely succeeded: He visited Beijing and Seoul immediately upon taking office and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao returned the courtesy with a recent visit of his own to Japan.

If Abe's visit was intended to break the ice in the bilateral relationship, Wen's trip was designed to "melt the ice." By virtually all accounts it was a success. His outreach to ordinary Japanese demonstrated a real desire to put relations back on course. His speech to a joint session of the Diet hit all the right marks, acknowledging Japanese leaders' acceptance of history and their taking responsibility for the past. He thanked Japan for its assistance in China's development. Most significant, the speech was broadcast in China, making it clear to ordinary Chinese that their leadership wants better relations with Tokyo.

The *volte-face* is the result of shifts in both Tokyo and Beijing. While Abe has not given the Chinese the pledge they seek to not visit Yasukuni Shrine during his tenure, he has made it clear that he understands their concerns. China has subtly shifted its position to accommodate Abe and not demand that statement.

A *modus vivendi* may have been reached, but the real issues that divide the two countries persist. China's rise unsettles many Japanese, just as Japan's pursuit of a more prominent international political and security role unnerves many Chinese. The two countries have territorial disputes, conflicting priorities over issues such as Iran and North Korea, and they are rivals for regional leadership. The relationship remains fragile.

U.S.-China-Japan cooperation can help build the trust that is needed in China-Japan relations. With the various sets of bilateral relationships strong and forward looking, Washington, Tokyo, and Beijing have a unique opportunity to build genuinely trilateral relations and, in particular, transform Chinese perceptions of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

To that end, the three countries should commence a senior-level strategic dialogue that explores the three countries' interests and concerns in Asia and other regions of

the world. Pacific Forum CSIS last week held the 11th round of a track-two trilateral effort that examines mutual concerns and visions. Participants agreed that an official trilateral dialogue is long overdue. The three countries' policymakers should heed these calls and establish a mechanism for discussion and policy coordination.

In addition to senior-level discussions, policy planners can take up specific issues and develop a concrete agenda aimed at building habits of cooperation and reducing suspicion. There is a long list of nontraditional security issues that the three governments can cooperate on: energy, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, disaster relief, aging societies, maritime security, are just a start. The key is developing specific proposals to work on together and producing results.

A central issue concerns how the U.S. and Japan, as allies, engage China. Chinese suspicions of the two countries' intentions are deep-rooted. China sees virtually every U.S. and Japanese security policy decision through a very narrow prism. Missile defense, Tokyo's discussion of acquisition of power projection capabilities (most recently in the context of the purchase of the F22), the recent Japan-Australia security declaration, the call for an alliance of democracies, Foreign Minister Aso Taro's talk of an Arc of Freedom and Prosperity, the inclusion of Taiwan in the 2005 "2+2" Declaration – all are seen in Beijing as aimed at China and setting the stage for its containment. The two countries should engage China and discuss the complex changes in the security environment that have driven these policy initiatives. China may or may not be part of the problem – the answer depends on Beijing's actions, not just those of Washington and Tokyo.

Working with the U.S. and Japan will also signal that China is serious about making a positive contribution to regional and global problems. For example, in addition to supporting demands that North Korea deliver on its commitment to a denuclearized Korean Peninsula, Beijing should express support for Japanese concerns about the fate of its abducted citizens, and should welcome (privately, if not publicly) U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's nuclear reassurances to Tokyo in the wake of North Korea's nuclear test. This process should also put to rest the mistaken belief that Washington seeks to exploit or encourage the Japan-China rivalry.

Taiwan poses a special problem. Some Chinese predict that if the history issue is finessed, Taiwan will assume the priority position in the Sino-Japanese bilateral relationship, exacerbating friction. That does not have to happen.

Engaging China trilaterally should help diminish concerns that the alliance aims at pressuring or containing Beijing. The U.S. and Japan have a shared interest in a peaceful solution of Taiwan-China differences. Neither

country supports Taiwan independence advocates, nor does it seek to embolden them. Both Tokyo and Washington are firmly opposed to any unilateral changes in the status quo. China has a similar interest in a peaceful solution of its dispute with Taiwan. Japan should make clear that it would accept any outcome peacefully negotiated between the two sides of the strait.

The possible costs of not cooperating are another reason to embrace trilateralism. Growing suspicion could result in miscalculation that could quickly turn into crisis. Good intentions are not enough: the April 2001 EP-3 incident is proof enough of that. Suspicions could lead to spiraling weapons procurements. Missile defense will cause China to deploy more IRBMs and ICBMs. Modernization is underway, but China's nuclear forces will be sized based on planners' assessment of the threat posed by missile defense to ensure that China attains its goal of a credible and survivable deterrent.

When it comes to the Korean Peninsula, if cooperation would strengthen the Six-Party Talks and help prepare the groundwork for a successful Northeast Asia security mechanism, then failure to work together could undermine the six-party process.

The rest of the region should welcome trilateral cooperation. Southeast Asian nations favor good relations among all three powers. They are likely to need reassurance that the major powers won't make decisions that affect them over their head and that all three remain committed to existing multilateral mechanisms, especially the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). They would see the reduced danger of Taiwan Strait conflict as a plus.

Only North and South Korea would be troubled by trilateral cooperation. Pyongyang should worry because its room for diplomatic maneuver would be much reduced and it would have less opportunity to play its negotiating partners off each other. South Korea is likely to be worried too: Seoul fears any accommodation between Beijing and Tokyo comes at its expense, the proverbial shrimp among whales. Seoul can remedy this, however, with a demonstration of its own readiness to engage its neighbors and allies as partners in joint efforts to solve regional problems.

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