



Building Cooperation among the U.S., Japan, and China by Jane Skanderup

Bilateral relationships among the U.S., Japan, and China are so complex and distinct from each other that improving trilateral cooperation often falls off the radar screen of most policy makers. Yet positive relations among these three key states are fundamental to peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region, and the rest of East Asia feels more secure when the three countries are engaging one another – no country wants to have to choose among them. The three countries have a responsibility to work out differences and improve cooperation for their own national interests as well as to work productively with countries in the region.

In this spirit, the Pacific Forum CSIS joined with the Tokyo-based Research Institute of Peace and Security and the Beijing-based China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations in August 2004 for the eighth dialogue in a series with more than 30 analysts from the three countries exchanging views on a range of contemporary issues. A select group of Young Leaders (20-35 year olds) also participated to provide generational input while experiencing the dialogue process first hand.

Perhaps it is no surprise that the issues that dominated our track-two discussions have been hot topics at the official level as well. These include North Korea and the six party talks; views of Taiwan; ongoing concerns in Sino-Japanese relations; Sino-U.S. relations and the assertion that the U.S. wants to contain China; Japan's more active international role, including in the United Nations; and differing approaches to multilateralism.

The tone of this dialogue was somewhat different from the previous Tokyo meeting in November 2003, when a positive outlook prevailed. At the 2004 meeting in Beijing, the mood was more animated by the traditional issues that have proven divisive: Taiwan, history issues between China and Japan, and assertions by China of U.S. containment. In spite of these divisions, cooperation on many fronts has gained a firm footing and participants expressed overall optimism.

China's embrace of multilateral fora is a marked departure from its rejection of these mechanisms just a few years ago, and is welcomed by Japan and the United States. The six-party talks to resolve the North Korea nuclear crisis exemplifies the kind of leadership that China is capable of exercising. There are still anxieties among the three about the distinct priorities each bring to the table. The U.S. and Japan would prefer that China be less conciliatory to the North Korean leadership, but China believes it cannot be successful if it is viewed as insensitive to North Korean concerns or as abandoning this isolated government. China worries that Japan is too focused on the abduction issue. Although this is a sticky issue, Tokyo is acutely aware that Japan faces a variety of threats from the

North's menacing behavior and wants a comprehensive solution. Although the U.S. took a positive step in the third round of talks, most agreed that North Korea would likely wait until after the U.S. elections in November – a risky strategy, advised some.

In the economic sphere, the three countries share significant global – not just regional – economic interests, and they should put more energy into the Doha Round. Yet all three governments are doing the opposite; the plethora of bilateral and regional agreements and fora are stumbling – not building – blocks, economists around the table warned. The ASEAN+3 process seems nebulous to many, but does reflect a new “Asian consciousness” that may help stabilize regional relationships. However, it is not likely to produce an institution capable of problem solving, and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum should be the regional economic institution of choice, given its inclusivity. The three countries need to revitalize APEC's mandate.

Taiwan was the most contentious issue. Some Chinese colleagues asserted that Beijing has concluded that its “carrot” approach of economic integration with Taiwan to improve political ties has failed, and the blame is laid squarely on President Chen Shui-bian for both his desire for the island's independence and for fostering antagonistic “Taiwan identity” feelings. The U.S. and Japan are equally frustrated that China fails to take into account the political, social, and cultural evolution in Taiwan. Instead of resorting to a “sticks” approach, China should pursue a strategy of winning the hearts and minds of the Taiwanese people. Yet China is aggrieved that the U.S. and Japan distinguish between rising Taiwan identity and independence motives, arguing that these are the same. In the end, all parties have managed this issue for the 50 years, and can continue to do so. The stakes are too high for failure.

Sino-Japanese relations remain constrained by a host of contentious issues. Both sides can do more: Japan needs to teach more of its modern history to its youth, and China should be more wary of allowing hatred toward Japan to fester. Japan is aware of and has tried to assuage Chinese concerns about Japan's greater regional and international role. Prior to the deployment of Self-Defense Forces in support of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, for example, Prime Minister Koizumi traveled to Beijing and met with then-President Jiang Zemin “to seek understanding,” which he received, although it was not widely reported in the Chinese media. The ongoing visits by PM Koizumi to Yasukuni Shrine are not meant to celebrate or mark a return to Japan's past militarism; in fact, the more China dissents, the more the visits become politically popular to show that Japan is not afraid of China's criticisms.

There were hints of optimism for improved Sino-Japan ties. Beijing has just sent former Vice Foreign Minister Wang

Yi as its new ambassador to Japan, an unusually senior position for this post, which could be evidence of interest in ameliorating the recent deterioration of the relationship. Several additional suggestions came from Chinese participants: the two countries worked “shoulder to shoulder” in peacekeeping in Cambodia in 1991, and they should be mutually supportive again; and China could invite Japan’s prime minister to the 2nd Greater Mekong Sub-region dialogue in 2005 to enhance cooperation.

Discussion ensued around Chinese participants’ assertions, apparent more in their papers than in individual presentations, that the U.S. strategic objective is to contain China. U.S. policy may hedge against a China that might have divergent interests from its own, but this is far removed from a containment policy. U.S. official foreign policy documents, including the Bush administration’s *National Security Strategy*, explicitly state the view that China is part of the solution, not part of the problem. But it is an open question as to what direction China’s leaders will take. Will China uphold its promises to play a responsible role or will it become more hegemonic as it grows more powerful? The U.S. and Japan cannot predict this; they can only encourage positive change.

Future Trilateral Cooperation. All parties agreed that the three countries can accomplish a great deal when they work together. Some ideas emerged during the discussion as well as from the individual presentations; Not all participants agreed with all suggestions and some are not politically realistic in the near term. They are offered to stimulate thinking on a range of problems.

- All agreed that the three countries have a shared interest in strengthening regional security mechanisms, particularly the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The three should encourage the establishment of an ASEAN secretariat, and as the chairmanship passes to weaker states like Laos and Myanmar, the three countries need to ensure that momentum is not lost.
- Although China is reluctant, more formal consultations between China and the U.S.-Japan alliance structure should be considered. The defense ministerial meetings under the ARF proposed by China offer an opportunity for sidebar trilateral discussions on this issue.
- Chinese apprehensions notwithstanding, trilateral cooperation would be promoted if the three countries supported a more active role for Japan in UN security-related deliberations, decision making, and deployments, with an eye toward eventual permanent Security Council membership.
- China should invite the U.S. and Japan to be observers in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to foster briefings, consultations, and intelligence-sharing on mutual interests in Central Asia.
- The three countries could establish cooperative training programs for peacekeepers and civilian police, and the three should more actively support a Southeast Asian peacekeeping contingent, which could be dispatched under either ASEAN or ARF auspices to trouble spots in Southeast Asia.

To maximize trilateral cooperation, there needs to be a clear articulation of overlapping goals and interests among the three nations and a better framework and roadmap for identifying and building upon common objectives. Our group hopes to continue efforts to examine and promote mutual trilateral interests to work toward a stronger foundation for U.S., Japan, and China relations.

Jane Skanderup is Director for Programs at the Pacific Forum CSIS. This is excerpted from the conference report, “Toward a Stronger Foundation for U.S., Japan, and China Relations,” Issues and Insights, August 2004, Pacific Forum CSIS (<http://www.csis.org/pacfor/issues/v04n06>), which includes 12 essays by conference participants. The Pacific Forum is grateful to The Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership and the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission for their invaluable support of this project.