

Amidst Cooperation, “Normalcy” Returns to Northeast Asia by Jeffrey Hornung

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Prior to Japan’s March 11 earthquakes and tsunami, Northeast Asian relations were not altogether encouraging. Tokyo and Beijing staggered from an acrimonious dispute to increasingly tense relations in the East China Sea. Tokyo was also frustrated with Moscow’s strengthening of control over the contested Northern Territories (the South Kuril Islands to the Russians). Although Tokyo and Seoul were pursuing a more positive dialogue, territorial disputes remained unresolved. While assistance offered Japan by its neighbors following the March 11 disasters briefly subsumed the politics of history in Northeast Asia, the goodwill appears to be waning as territorial disputes reemerge amid the cooperation.

In September 2010, Tokyo and Beijing were locked in a dispute over the arrest of a Chinese fishing trawler captain who rammed two Japanese Coast Guard vessels near the disputed islands of Senkaku (Diaoyu in Chinese). Beijing’s response was anything but diplomatic, as it dramatically reduced ties with Japan. The episode ended with Tokyo’s release of the captain, but Japanese and Chinese militaries remain engaged in waters near the islands. While Chinese fishing boats continue to enter waters claimed by Japan, Chinese military aircraft have repeatedly flown unannounced into Japan’s air defense identification zone, an area beyond a nation’s territorial airspace where aircraft are required to identify themselves. These incursions have prompted Air Self-Defense Force (SDF) to scramble air defense aircraft on multiple occasions. On March 7, 2011 a helicopter from China’s State Oceanic Administration buzzed a Maritime SDF destroyer in waters where their exclusive economic zones overlap. Contributing to further tensions was Beijing’s reported unilateral drilling in a disputed gas field in these waters, despite a 2008 agreement for joint development. When the earthquake hit, there was no reason to believe these troubling trends would stop.

The same was true of Tokyo’s relations with Moscow. With the intention of strengthening Russian control over the Southern Kurils, President Dmitry Medvedev became the first Russian leader to visit the islands in November 2010. Since then, Moscow has decided to invest \$48 million for socio-economic development and to build up Russia’s military presence by deploying an air defense system and a mobile coastal defense system equipped with anti-ship cruise missiles.

Tokyo strongly opposed Moscow’s moves. Not only did Prime Minister Kan Naoto call Medvedev’s visit “inexcusable rudeness,” Foreign Minister Maehara Seiji accused Moscow of violating international law over the sovereignty of the islands. Despite bilateral meetings in early March 2011, no agreement was reached on when to resume talks. At the time of the earthquake, the dispute dominated bilateral relations.

Tokyo’s relations with Seoul stood in sharp contrast to those with Beijing and Moscow. Until recently, “normal” bilateral relations mirrored Tokyo’s relations with Beijing and Moscow in that they were dominated by historical disputes over the Takeshima – Dokdo in Korean – islets. However, bilateral ties have improved since President Lee Myung-bak’s call for “future-oriented” relations with Japan and Prime Minister Kan’s decision to return stolen Korean cultural artifacts. More importantly, Tokyo sided closely with Seoul throughout North Korea’s recent provocations. In fact, Tokyo and Seoul began exploring the possibility of signing an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement and a General Security of Military Information Agreement. Noticeably absent was the politicization of problems associated with the “old normal.” Despite the unresolved territorial dispute, the prioritization of common threats was a sign that Seoul and Tokyo were working toward a “new normal.”

March 11 brought a welcome pause to the politics of history. Japan’s neighbors quickly and generously expressed condolences and rapidly dispatched rescue teams to search for survivors. They followed with assistance that includes, among other items, supplies from China worth \$4.57 million, 52.6 tons of boric acid and \$12.5 million worth of supplies from South Korea, and over 17,000 blankets and 3 tons of drinking water courtesy of Russia. Finally, with Japan expecting a continuing power shortfall, the three countries took unprecedented efforts to assist with energy. Russia promised to divert 6,000 MW of electricity from its Far East, send 200,000 tons of LNG, double oil exports to 18 million metric tons, and increase oil product supply by 4.5 million tons to 28.5 million tons. South Korea announced it would divert a portion of its LNG imports, ship refined petroleum products to make up for losses in refinery capabilities, and send four packaged power stations. China sent 10,000 tons of gasoline and 10,000 tons of diesel fuel. The assistance is crucial to Japan’s recovery.

Even as assistance to Japan continues, relations are returning to “normal.” Consider, first, Beijing. Despite the calm in activities near the Senkakus/Diaoyus, on March 26, another Chinese State Ocean Administration helicopter buzzed a Maritime SDF destroyer patrolling near the median line claimed by Japan. This was the first fly-by since March 11, and Japan responded by lodging a formal protest with China to complain about the “dangerous act.” To no avail, a small plane from the same agency conducted a similar fly-by on April 1.

The same is true of Moscow. After the earthquake, Moscow went silent on plans for strengthening control of the Kurils. Yet, on March 25, the Russian Regional Development Ministry announced plans to allocate over \$40 million in 2011 toward enhancing transport infrastructure on the islands. This includes a new airport on Iturup (Etorofu in Japanese), renovation of an existing airport and sea port on Kunashir (Kunashiri), and rebuilding a highway on Shikotan (same).

Surprisingly, Tokyo's relationship with Seoul appears to be regressing to the "old normal." On March 30, in response to Japan's approval of new middle school textbooks, a spokesman for South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade "strongly protested" the textbooks' "unjust sovereignty claims" of Dokdo/Takeshima. The next day, the same ministry announced that Japan was solely responsible for fraying bilateral relations and, among other measures to reinforce sovereignty claims, Seoul was renovating the islands' heliport. Whatever "new normal" Seoul and Tokyo were heading toward, the "old normal" appears to be making a comeback.

It is wishful thinking to believe that March 11 provided the Northeast Asian states an opportunity to move beyond historical disputes. Yet, disaster relief cooperation could have laid the *groundwork* for a greater paradigm shift in relations. Unfortunately, relations appear to be returning to "normal." Northeast Asia's brief break from history is over.

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