



The New Trilateral Strategic Calculus by Brad Glosserman

There is an irresistible temptation to sort out winners and losers in the post-Sept. 11 world. Relations with the United States are the grand prize as governments scramble for position in the war against terrorism. Russian President Vladimir Putin is a big winner; he and President George W. Bush seemed to have forged a new relationship for their countries in the aftermath of the attacks. Pakistan is also in the plus column: President Pervez Musharraf's decision to side with the U.S. against the Taliban regime it supported averted a dangerous drift in relations. Are Islamabad's gains Delhi's losses? Washington says no, but some zero-sum strategists in India see their country losing status as Washington courts Pakistan in an attempt to rein in Muslim fundamentalists in Afghanistan.

In Northeast Asia, the scorekeeping is especially acute. Although the governments in both Beijing and Tokyo would deny competing for Washington's favor, there is a tendency in both capitals to view the other as a rival for Washington's attention. In fact, however, the trilateral relationship needs to be viewed as just that – a relationship of three partners. They may not be equals, but zero-sum calculations must be resisted.

U.S.-Japan relations have solidified in the wake of the terrorist attacks. The government of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro responded with unexpected speed and crafted an unprecedented package of measures to assist the U.S. Long-time Japan watchers have been stunned at the response. The prime minister has been out in front, assuring the United States of both his and his country's sympathy and unqualified support. As a result, the bilateral relationship is on its most stable and solid footing in years.

China was equally quick to support the U.S.-led coalition. President Jiang Zemin was one of the first world leaders to offer condolences; he sent President George W. Bush a telegram after the attack. Beijing has voted for anti-terrorism resolutions in the United Nations Security Council, agreed to change the agenda of the APEC meeting that it was hosting in Shanghai to support the anti-terrorism effort, provided intelligence and information on terrorist networks, and extended food aid for refugees.

Yet it is clear that Tokyo's relations with Washington are considerably warmer than those the U.S. has with Beijing. Part of the explanation is the official relationship the U.S. has with each country. Japan is an ally. Relations with the United States are supposed to be good – and better than those with a non-allied government. China's status is ambiguous. The administration no longer speaks of it as a rival or strategic competitor, but the nature of the relationship is still a work in progress. No matter what ultimately prevails, the Sino-U.S. relationship will not rival that of the U.S. and Japan.

This may seem obvious, but there were jitters in Tokyo during the latter half of the 1990s. Japan bashing gave way to "Japan passing" when then-President Bill Clinton visited Beijing without paying respects to his alliance partners in Seoul and Tokyo. That phase yielded in turn to "Japan nothing" as the economic malaise in Japan seemed to paralyze and marginalize Tokyo's capacity for action. Those concerns seem to have been put to rest with the coming of a new administration in Washington, but insecurities are always quick to resurface. It is revealing that one of Tokyo's concerns immediately after the attacks was the fear that China would be more forthcoming in its support than Japan. This provided additional incentive for Mr. Koizumi to act boldly and swiftly.

Of course, a relationship's official status may not be the obstacle it seems. After all, Russia, which is not an ally, has improved its relationship with the U.S. post-9-11.

That suggests that some of the explanation for the good relations is personal. Mr. Bush is very comfortable with Mr. Koizumi. He has invited the prime minister to Camp David and responds to him with genuine warmth. The president does not enjoy the same casual familiarity – which seems important to him – with his Chinese counterpart. Neither does Mr. Jiang's insistence on the limits of what the U.S. could do – his demand for UN authorization and minimization of collateral damage, for example – endear him to Mr. Bush. Those were American goals, but they did not need to be articulated at that time. Those comments politicized the situation and deprived Mr. Jiang of an opportunity to respond on a personal level and build a relationship with a very personable president.

The official line in China is the world has entered an era of "major power cooperation" and anyone toting up winners and losers is guilty of "Cold War thinking." That may be "spin," but the logic is more accurate than many give it credit. In Northeast Asia, in particular, there needs to be an end to the zero-sum thinking that has dominated strategic calculations.

The three countries are the three major powers in East Asia. The U.S. and Japan account for about 40 percent of the global economy; China's economic role is increasing and entry into the World Trade Organization will spur increased productivity and competitiveness. It will also create serious challenges for the country and the leadership; Washington and Tokyo can help Beijing deal with them. The U.S. and China are nuclear powers. They have permanent seats on the UN Security Council, a status that Japan is trying to claim for itself. In short, the three countries are critical players regionally and globally. Cooperation is a must.

For the past two years, Pacific Forum CSIS has organized discussions with analysts from the United States, Japan, and China. Those meetings have covered a wide range of issues, but they have focused on the need for trilateral cooperation. The participants have conceded that coordination will be

difficult, given the disparate interests involved and the inequalities in the relationships. Nevertheless, there is also agreement that all three governments need to work together on both the bilateral and trilateral levels. The point was driven home by Yang Bojiang, division director for Northeast Asian Studies at the Chinese Institute for Contemporary International Relations: He concluded “the trilateral relationship between China, the U.S., and Japan is a great power relationship that determines the trend of the pattern in the Asia-Pacific region in the 21st century.”

Cooperation is complicated by suspicions. China still worries about Japanese militarism, a legacy of World War II. Japan is increasingly alarmed by China’s assertiveness. The U.S. and China have had numerous contretemps in the last few years from the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 to the EP-3 reconnaissance plane incident in April 2001.

In this environment, our discussions yielded several principles that should guide dialogue among the three governments. First, there should be as much trilateral engagement as possible. China’s worries about the intent and purpose of the U.S.-Japan alliance would be much reduced if the two governments together explained to Beijing what they were doing and why. Second, transparency is to be favored in matters ranging from military decision making to the imposition of economic restrictions.

Finally, and most important, there should be one guiding principle for trilateral cooperation: there should be no gains for two of the parties that come at the expense of the third. As one of our participants wisely noted, “balance in trilateral relations is an ideal, but it’s a fantasy. But we should not create further imbalances.”

That is the essence of the post-Cold War outlook in Northeast Asia. It will be hard to resist the temptation to keep score, but it is a habit well worth breaking.

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