Tokyo and Seoul are indisputably Washington’s two most important allies in Asia. They are not only central to America’s security architecture for the region, they are also important economic partners and share common values such as democracy and a commitment to the rule of law. And yet the prospect of a deep and effective trilateral relationship among the three countries has proved elusive. Is there a path forward?
A Japanese Perspective

Rules Matter Over Geopolitical Risks

By Akihiko Tanaka

Despite enjoying remarkable prosperity and unprecedented peace, East Asia faces geopolitical challenges that could become fundamental threats. North Korea’s continuing attempts to develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles threaten its neighbors’ security. China’s behavior in both the East and South China Seas, if unchecked, could undermine the basis of international security built up by the longstanding efforts of the United States and its allies in the Pacific. How to maintain the foundations of East Asian peace and prosperity by reducing these geopolitical risks is the crux of Japan’s foreign and security strategy.

The only sensible policy that Japan can and should take is to further strengthen its alliance with the US, while making multilateral efforts to encourage cooperative behavior and constrain negative geopolitical behavior. The February summit between Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and US President Donald Trump was an extremely important and positive first step. Japan also should continue to strengthen its defense and coast guard capabilities. Despite the political uncertainties in the US and South Korea, trilateral co-operation among Japan, South Korea and the US should be strengthened. The three countries should use multilateral frameworks such as APEC, the East Asia Summit and the G-20 to engage China to uphold the values of the liberal international order globally as well as regionally.

Challenges to the Rules

The current peace and prosperity in East Asia is nothing short of remarkable, however. We must not allow ourselves to be overly optimistic about the future. North Korea undertook two nuclear weapons tests in 2016 and continues to develop its ballistic missile program. That it continues to ignore United Nations Security Council resolutions is a serious challenge to the rule-based international order centered on the UN. In addition, although it is impossible to predict its future, one should not be surprised to see sudden changes or instability in North Korea.

China’s recent behavior, especially since sometime around 2010, is worrying. When the Japanese Coast Guard arrested a Chinese fisherman who had intentionally collided his ship with a coast guard ship within Japanese territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands, China reacted harshly. As his detention lengthened, China announced it was stopping cabinet-level contacts and canceling many people-to-people exchanges, including a concert by a Japanese pop group. It also restricted visits by Chinese tourists to Japan, discontinued negotiations on increasing commercial flights between the two countries, detained four Japanese on charges of “taking photographs in a military district” and stopped the export to Japan of “rare earth” minerals, which are critical for electronic and magnetic products on which Japan was then almost 100-per cent dependent on China.

These reactions were actually milder than what China did in the autumn of 2012. To protest the decision by the administration of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda to buy the Senkaku Islands from their private landlord, China unleashed a
series of strong actions. Anti-Japanese protests took place in more than 100 cities throughout the country. Huangdao JUSCO, a supermarket owned by a Japanese chain, was surrounded by 3,000 protesters, some of whom stormed inside and ransacked the premises, destroying goods worth 200 million yuan. Toyota and Honda auto dealerships were set on fire. The waters surrounding the Senkaku Islands saw a dramatic rise in Chinese activity. On Sept. 14, 2012, an unprecedented six ships belonging to China Marine Surveillance (Zhongguo Haijian), an agency identified with aggressive actions in the South and East China Seas, entered the territorial waters around the islands. Since then, China has continued sending its coast guard ships regularly into the territorial waters around the Senkakus (see Figure 1) and has also increased Air Force activities in the East China Sea.

China’s activities in the South China Sea are also worrying for Japan. Despite the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DoC), to which China and ASEAN countries agreed in 2002, and which states that the parties should “refrain from action of inhabiting on the presently uninhabited islands or other features,” China has been engaged in land-reclamation around the uninhabited rocks, reefs and low-tide elevations, resulting in 1,300 hectares of reclaimed land. It has also constructed massive structures such as long runways and port facilities that can be used for military purposes and has started deploying weapons to the islands.

This assertive behavior appears to reflect the increasing capabilities of Chinese military and para-military organizations. The official military budget, although understating real military spending, has shown a size and trend that is worrisome to its neighbors (see Figure 2). The capability of the Chinese Coast Guard has shown impressive improvement. China has increased and modernized its maritime surveillance ships; between 2000 and 2012, it launched about 20 patrol class boats under 1,000 tons.1 Japanese policy-makers now suspect that China intends to make maximum use of its increased capabilities. Deng Xiaoping famously cautioned Chinese leaders to keep a low profile and “conceal our capacities (taoguang yanghui),” but around 2010, immediately after China surpassed Japan in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2009, at least some senior Chinese leaders may have concluded that the time had come to “reveal” their capabilities. President Hu Jintao added a word to another of Deng’s directives to reflect a significant change; instead of Deng’s “do what we can” (yousuo zuowei), Hu directed the country’s leadership to “actively do what we can” (jiji yousuo zuowei).2

DISCERNING UNCLEAR MOTIVATIONS

Since the actual decision-making process in China is still unclear, we cannot be certain exactly what Beijing’s intentions are; there may be cases of assertive behavior not fully under the control of the central leadership. Some of the behavior that outside observers consider assertive may actually be a result of un-ordained decision-making among different parts of the Chinese state structure. But if the behavior has a negative impact on the conditions for peace in the region, whether co-ordinated or not, China’s neighbors need to devise a strategy to cope with such behavior.

In fact, many of the changes in Japan’s security policy since the 1990s have been motivated by a need to cope with these security challenges, especially the threats posed by North Korea. The 1994 nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula revealed that Japan was totally unprepared, legally as well as operationally. The legal system until then did not account for a military contingency that did not involve Japan directly, and as a result, Japan was not legally able to fully support American operations that might be conducted on the Korean Peninsula. The 1997 Japan-US Guidelines for Defense Co-operation was an attempt to improve co-operation between the two countries under such contingencies. The law to legalise Japan’s co-operation with the US in the “situation area surrounding Japan” (shuehn jita) was passed by the Diet in 1999.

1 https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/中華人民共和国の海上保安機関

North Korea’s missile launches have also intensified Japanese debate on defense procurement. Immediately after the Taepodong launch in 1998, Japan decided to build its own intelligence satellite program. The administration of Junichiro Koizumi made a cabinet decision in December 2003 to build a ballistic-missile defense system. Japan now deploys PAC 3 systems throughout the country and has six Aegis-class ships. Still, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, when he became prime minister for the first time in 2006, decided that Japan may not be able to co-operate with the US effectively unless it changes the interpretation of the post-war constitution that banned the exercise of the right of collective defense. As a result, he set up an advisory panel to start deliberations on the issue. As Abe had to step down in 2007, the deliberations did not result in anything concrete.

The idea was revived after Abe became prime minister again in 2012. The cabinet decided in 2014 that the Constitution should be re-interpreted to allow for the limited exercise of collective defense rights, and the Diet passed a new set of security-related laws in September 2015. Another development was the creation of a more centralized system of decision-making through the establishment of the National Security Council with a fully staffed secretariat in 2013.

The rise of China and China’s assertive behavior in the East China Sea also caused changes in deployments. Until well into the first decade of the 21st century, Japan’s Self Defense Forces had maintained a deployment structure set up during the Cold War: the most important facilities were centered on the north. Very small forces were deployed in Okinawa prefecture. This northern orientation has been changed to put more emphasis on the southwestern area. Many F-15s and P3s are now based in Okinawa; in 2016, the Ground Self Defense Forces opened a station for the first time in Yonaguni, the westernmost island of Japan. The Coast Guard also made a significant redeployment to strengthen operations in the southwest.

ALLIANCES AND SOUTH KOREA

As the above measures indicate, Japan’s responses to the increasing geopolitical risks have always been centered on strengthening the alliance with the US as well as its own defense capabilities. All important documents on Japan’s security policy, including the National Security Strategy of 2013, are consistent on this account. As a result, the US policy of “rebalancing” toward Asia — initiated under the administration of Barack Obama — has been welcome, and Japan has a deep interest in the policy continuing under Trump. In order to deter North Korea, it is becoming more and more important to maintain the credibility of the US policy of extended deterrence. Improvement of ballistic-missile defense systems is also crucial. The deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in South Korea is extremely important. To persuade China of the futility of making fait accompli moves in the South China Sea, the determination of the US to monitor and oppose further attempts at such moves is critical — even though the decision of the international arbitration tribunal against China’s claims in the South China Sea was quite significant. Some of Trump’s statements before his inauguration caused concerns among Japan’s decision-makers, but the joint statement on February 10 reiterated the common position of the two countries on this issue.

The role of South Korea is also critical for Japan. As allies of the US, both Tokyo and Seoul should increase their security co-operation. The conclusion of the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) between Japan and South Korea in November 2016 was a positive development. Granted that there may be some hesitation on the part of South Korea because of history issues and a general apprehension among the public about increasing security ties with Japan, the stakes are too high for both countries not to expand and deepen their security relationship. The agreement on comfort women concluded in December 2015 was an important milestone, and both countries should fulfill their obligations stipulated in the agreement.

A strategy to deal with a rising China is not limited to military and defense areas. Because the health of China’s economy is critical to the economies of Japan, South Korea and the US, engagement with China in a variety of areas is crucial. Direct communication with Beijing is always important. As the opaqueness of the Chinese decision-making process continues, and as China enters a critical period of leadership transition, it is extremely important that the leaders of our three countries pursue opportunities for dialogue with President Xi Jinping and other top-ranking Communist Party leaders. To the extent that outsiders have difficulty understanding how top-ranking Chinese leaders are briefed by their subordinates, including the military, the leaders of our three countries should use the opportunity to provide candid observations to Xi and others as to how China is now being viewed in the world.

DIPLOMACY MATTERS

Multilateral diplomacy is not a panacea. But multilateral summit meetings are useful occasions to influence Chinese leaders. The series of multilateral meetings held in East Asia last year — the G-20 in China, the East Asia Summit in Laos, and so on — may not have directly constrained Chinese behavior. But these meetings create incentives for Chinese leaders to behave more responsibly, if only to avoid losing face. Though China denies the legality of the decision by the International Tribunal on the South China Sea announced in July 2016, which was mentioned repeatedly in and out of the multilateral meetings, the fact that China has refrained from assertive actions around the Scarborough Shoal since then indicates at least some impact. In any case, to take advantage of the multilateral settings, the three countries should make efforts to cultivate friendship with as many countries as possible.

Increasing ties with other American allies such as Australia is obviously desirable. The recent improvement in relations between Washington and New Delhi and between Tokyo and New Delhi is in the right direction. The decision of the US to lift sanctions against Vietnam and Myanmar also helps ties among America’s allies to create an environment in which China finds it in its interest to pursue more restrained behavior. If the Chinese leaders feel that it is necessary to outmaneuver the Japanese in the competition to be a good global citizen, it would contribute to the reduction of geopolitical risks in East Asia and to the continuation of peace and prosperity.

Akihiko Tanaka is a Professor at the Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia at the University of Tokyo.