Awaiting the Handshake: China-US Relations Are the Key to Stability In Northeast Asia
By Yuan Peng

A complex web of disputes and historical grievances continues to divide the countries of Northeast Asia, despite improvements in relations towards the end of the 20th century.

The key to future stability lies in understanding the need for China and the US to reach out to one another in order to provide stability among China, Japan and Korea, writes Chinese academic Yuan Peng.

WHILE ALREADY a dynamic region at the turn of the 21st century, Northeast Asia witnessed rapid progress in Chinese-Japanese and Chinese-South Korean economic relations and increased regional economic interaction around that time. Unfortunately, these relations soured somewhat in 2010, as tensions heightened between China and Japan over the disputed Diaoyu Islands (Senkaku to the Japanese) and territorial waters in the East China Sea. In the case of South Korea, official attitudes toward China sank to their lowest point in nearly a decade because of the Cheonan incident, when North Korea was accused of sinking a South Korean warship in March 2010 at the cost of 46 South Korean sailors; it was an accusation from which China distanced itself, much to the anger of South Korea.

Three factors are responsible for the deterioration in the regional environment. First, China’s emergence as the world’s second-largest economy has ended the past century’s “strong Japan versus weak China” and caused an historical imbalance in the regional power architecture. Second, a key component of President Barack Obama’s global strategy, the renewed focus on east Asia, includes an increase in the forward deployment of US military forces in Northeast Asia, which has influenced co-operation in the region. Finally, untimely incidents like the Cheonan sinking have added fuel to the flames, strengthening the Washington-Seoul alliance, impairing trust between Beijing and Seoul and precipitating a tense standoff between the two Koreas.

In essence, these three destabilizing factors are all legacies of the Cold War and of lingering historical grievances felt by Northeast Asian states toward one another. Furthermore, the three outcomes capable of cooling off the flashpoints — the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, a China-Japan-US dialogue and regional security co-operation — all remain elusive.

To make matters worse, China-US ties have also run into trouble, with the stable relationship of the last eight years grinding to a standstill. Obama’s initial warmth toward China turned out to be short-lived, as a wide array of disputes broke out all at once: quarrels over climate change, cyber security-related Google dispute, arms sales to Taiwan, Obama’s meeting with the Dalai Lama, disagreements over the Renminbi exchange rate and disputes over the Yellow and South China Seas.

WASHINGTON-BEIJING IS THE KEY
The current challenges in Northeast Asia are inherently related to the sudden chill in China-US relations and have resulted in diverse assessments in regional capitals regarding further developments. For example, while Washington unequivocally believed Seoul’s allegations that a North Korean torpedo sank the Cheonan, Beijing argued that further independent investigation was needed before any conclusions could be reached. From the viewpoint of the Chinese leadership, it was ill-advised for the White House to jump to hasty conclusions and, worse still, to resort to twisting Pyongyang’s arm. Given a relatively stable China-US relationship before and after the incident, a turnaround should have been possible. Instead, a tit-for-tat ensued, beginning with joint US-South Korea air and naval exercises directed against North Korea and media hype regarding the deployment of the aircraft carrier USS George Washington to participate in military exercises in the Yellow Sea. This, in turn, sparked strong resentment within the Chinese military, which viewed the exercises as a US effort to counter the Chinese Navy in response to the Cheonan incident. This then triggered a chain reaction that led to an even closer Washington-Seoul alliance and a revival of Beijing-Pyongyang relations. Clearly, intervention by the US, despite its status as an outsider to the conflict, only aggravated the problems.
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Indeed, outside interference has not benefited any of the countries in Northeast Asia. The following “ifs” support this argument: If the Cheonan incident had not occurred, China-US détente would have persisted; if the quarrel over the Diaoyu Islands had not occurred, China-US-Japan interactions would have been smoother; if Kim Jong-il had not visited China twice in the span of two months, there would have been less concern within the Pentagon over the recent Hu Jintao/Kim Jong-il embrace.

In all of this, we can clearly perceive the logic of what I call “dual stability” — namely, that when China-US ties deteriorate, so too do relations among the countries of Northeast Asia; and when China-US ties improve, so too do relations within Northeast Asia. The key to cracking this “Catch-22” of synchronized reactions lies in fostering genuine regional collaboration between these two great powers. China-US collaboration in Northeast Asia — a genuine handshake — is in fact within easy reach.

FRAMEWORK FOR HARMONY

In Central Asia, there is already the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a relatively mature institution targeting terrorism, separatism and religious extremism. But even if the United States were to participate in the SCO in some capacity in the future, a China-US agreement in this region would be unlikely.

In Southeast Asia, there is the more mature Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its extended partnerships — ASEAN + 1 with China and ASEAN +3 with China, Japan and South Korea — and also the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement. But a significant China-US agreement in Southeast Asia would risk usurping ASEAN leadership and confound the already complicated territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea.

Northeast Asia, however, a China-US multilateral security mechanism could complement the US-Japan-South Korea alliance. Such a framework could break the Cold War strait-jacket that has long hampered regional relations. Furthermore, both sides share extensive common interests: the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the establishment of a multilateral cooperation mechanism that addresses the interests of both parties and the economic integration of Northeast Asia that would yield a windfall of reciprocal benefits. Moreover, both sides have distinct strengths and share interests that provide the basis for regional teamwork. Although far ahead of Beijing in absolute strength, both military and economic, Washington has its core interests not in the Asia-Pacific region, but elsewhere.

In addition, the foundation for such an agreement already exists. Mutual political trust has been built up during the course of several rounds of Six-Party talks concerning the North Korean nuclear issue. Repeated efforts to explore the possibility of a Northeast Asia security co-operation mechanism and the feasibility of a trilateral China-US-Japan strategic dialogue have also been undertaken. Further, it is especially noteworthy that none of the other regional players — Japan, Russia and the two Koreas — desire a continuation of the ongoing tensions. This provides the proposed China-US relationship with the requisite external environment in which to move forward.

COLD WAR HANGOVER

Northeast Asia remains burdened by its Cold War history, and successfully moving beyond this legacy is an important precondition for genuine co-operation. The US-Japan military alliance, along with the forward deployment of the US military, is the hallmark of this Cold War legacy. Therefore, promoting a trilateral strategic dialogue between China and the US-Japan alliance is vitally significant in preventing continued rivalry, just as ties between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Russia presaged the end of the Cold War in Europe.

The other obvious issue requiring China-US collaboration is the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the rest of Northeast Asia. In this regard, the Six-Party talks have proven to be the most successful and effective mechanism for dialogue. Premised on Pyongyang’s readiness to return to the negotiating table, China and the US should reinvigorate the talks by moving beyond the Cheonan incident and temporarily setting aside the issue of abductions of Japanese hostages by North Korea. Gaining control of the North Korean nuclear issue is the first step toward encouraging Pyongyang to abandon nuclear weapons altogether. At the same time, China and the US should try to prevent Japan and South Korea from pursuing their threats to “go nuclear” in response to North Korea’s nuclear program. Indeed, only denuclearization can genuinely safeguard peace, stability and development in the region. While the original source of the faltering progress toward a regional security mechanism is Pyongyang’s unwillingness to abandon its nuclear ambitions, the situation has since become far more complicated. The regional security landscape has expanded beyond the North Korean nuclear issue to include strategic disputes among nearly all states in the region.

The complex setting of Northeast Asia requires that China and the US abandon the legacies of the Cold War and embrace an innovative mechanism for security co-operation that considers the security concerns and interests of all the parties in the region. This would usher in a future-orientated political atmosphere of enduring peace and prosperity. In light of this, it is perhaps worth concluding with an ancient Chinese verse that captures both the current challenges and opportunities for Northeast Asia: “The hills and mountains have no end, there seems to be no road beyond; but dim with willows, bright with flowers, another village appears: one has a sudden glimpse of hope in the midst of bewilderment.”

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