

The United States-Japan- China Triangle in the Post- Cold War Early Decades

A Case Study of Applied Political Science

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Series in Politics



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*To the memory of my dear brother, **NEJEH***

Introduction

I.1 Background to the Study

The post-Cold War United States-Japan-China¹ triangle, during the first two decades after the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, stood for the pivot of Asia-Pacific politics. From 1990 and up to the end of the post-Cold war second decade, the power relations between China and Japan, and the rules of their respective interaction with the United States were critical in determining the outcome of this interaction among the three parties. Interaction outcomes are usually governed by a variety of variables, primarily the power and security calculations of each side, and of a couple of decisive drivers in East Asian politics, such as the U.S.-Japan alliance and the rising economic and military power of China, which are dialectically interrelated. Now, as the new international order of the US unipolarity was a post-Cold War reality, the balance of power and the quest for power among these drivers, together with their respective security calculations, structurally influenced East Asia's complex security situation where the United States claimed it was playing a positive role through the U.S. forward military presence in the region, which was controversially perceived by regional actors.

On the one hand, nations, like Japan and South Korea, were officially receptive to the U.S. claim of being a stabilizing factor in a volatile East Asian security environment. On the other hand, countries like China, North Korea and, to some extent, Russia, were not comfortable with what they used to perceive as an excessive military presence aiming at containing their modernization programs and, in the long run, preventing the rise of a potential

¹ China will refer to the People's Republic of China (PRC) established on October 1st, 1949 by Mao Zedong after the defeat of the Nationalists, who fled to the Island of Taiwan, where they declared the establishment of the Republic of China on Taiwan (ROC). Both sides claim that they represent the whole Chinese people, and state that Taiwan is Chinese territory. In the early fifties, Beijing and Taipei sought reunification, but they differed on modalities. Today, however, Taiwan is divided against itself as to the rationale and feasibility of reunification. The island has become an almost de facto independent country, but the PRC has always stressed that it will never allow Taiwan to declare its independence, and will be ready to use force to prevent that. Here, the ROC will be referred to as Taiwan, and the PRC as China.

challenger to a Cold War status quo which was already dominated by the United States in collaboration with allies like Japan, which itself was not immune to American political and economic abuses and sovereignty infringements.

In the United States, the China threat and North Korea's² nuclear weapons were the most effective post-Cold War U.S. political weapons, which were manipulated, exaggerated, and marketed in a way that fit the U.S. strategy of fear in East Asia. Frightening vulnerable nations in the region into accepting the claim that the U.S. military presence in East Asia since WWII always played a positive security role especially in Northeast Asia, and did continue to play that role even after the end of the Cold War. In October 2005, the bilateral U.S.-Japan ad hoc Security Consultative Committee (SCC) summed up the post-Cold War United States policy in East Asia, and unveiled the rationale of the U.S. military presence in the region. The most recent was that of October 2005, unofficially known as the ATARA Report, wherein the SCC opines that "to maintain an effective military presence in Asia and honor alliance commitments there, Washington must maintain a forward presence to reassure friends and allies of its ability to respond to crises and dissuade others from acting in ways that harm U.S. interests" (Wright and Hague 60-64).

Moreover, at the China Conference of April 28-29, 2006, at the University of Chicago, I asked the former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense in 2006: "you said that the American forces and military deployments in East Asia are aimed at deterring conflicts. My question was, what kind of conflicts were you expecting?"³ He argued that "I think the rest of the world, looking at China and

² Hearings of the Committee on National Security of the House of Representatives of the One Hundred Fourth Congress, March 20, 1996, "Security Challenges Posed by China", p.1, 2, 35. For more on this see also, Hearing Before, The Committee on Armed Services House of Representatives of the One Hundred Sixth Congress. 2nd Session, July 19, 2000, "Military Capabilities of the Peoples Republic of China", Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001.

³ "China and the Future of the World", April 28-29, 2006, Chicago Society, University of Chicago. Among the guest speakers were His Excellency Wang Guangya, Permanent representative of the People's republic of China to the United Nations; Peter W. Rodman, U.S. Assistant secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Christopher R. Hill, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs; Ambassador Wu Jianmin, Former Chinese Ambassador to France, the United Nations in Geneva, and current President of China Foreign affairs University; **Interviewee 1**, a prominent political science professor, a founder of a new school of thought in political science and

the immense power that is accumulating, is hypersensitive to uses of force by China" (Ibid). As a matter of fact, the United States was more worried about what China would do with its "accumulating power" than about East Asia's security which it was claiming it was defending. This actually did shed clouds of doubt about the credibility of this claim, which made it difficult to accept such a claim at face value.

Therefore, the triangular dimension and dynamic of the U.S.-Japan-China equation could be seen, for instance, in China's reaction to the October 2005 the U.S.-Japan SCC ATARA Report, which ostensibly aimed at negating the ongoing Chinese military modernization program and touched upon China's Achilles Heel-Taiwan. Reacting to the ATARA Report, Beijing passed the March 2005 Anti-Secession Law a couple of weeks after the report stated for the first time that Taiwan was now "a common security challenge" both for Washington and Tokyo. From a Chinese perspective, such a declaration showed that the United States, taking advantage of its overwhelming military power in East Asia, and with Japanese complicity, was going hegemonic (Walker 19). While suspicion that was fraught with historical rivalry prevails between China and Japan, the United States remained committed to a strategy that was seeking to secure its continued dominance for economic, political and strategic predominance" (Zhao 23-28), shedding doubts as to the reality of the U.S. military presence in East Asia. And this is exactly what fits into the political prescription of *animus dominandi*, that is the pursuit of power as the ultimate objective of states, a pursuit that is manifested through the American "empire of bases" (Ch. Johnson 151) in a crescent-shaped alliance structured around China, starting from Japan in Northeast Asia and going down to India in Southwest Asia.

Therefore, during the first two decades of the post-Cold War era, Japan and China, together with the United States, were going to shape the contours of twenty-first-century East Asia security. At that time, Japan was not only the world's second-largest economy with a well-equipped and competent military, but also stood as the pivot of the U.S. "hub and spoke" strategy in post-Cold War East Asia⁴. But China in its turn, was a rising power which was confusing the United States and Japan as to its unclear intentions regarding the half-

currently co-director of a program on international security policy at a major university in Chicago.

⁴ U.S.-Japan Alliance: Transformation and Realignment for the Future. October 29, 2005, Bruce A. Wright & Mark o. Hague, "The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Sustaining the Transformation" JFQ / issue 44, 1st quarter 2007, 60-64.

century regional status quo established by the United States in the wake of the Japanese WWII defeat in 1945. China and Japan, combined, account for almost three-quarters of East Asia's economic activity and more than half of the region's military spending (Przystup et al. 1).

Despite their deep economic ties and a doubling of their bilateral trade in the previous five years⁵, however, the Sino-Japanese strategic relationship was most of the time strained mainly in the post-Cold war era, with inevitable implications for the U.S. relationship with both of them. As American efforts to improve relations with one side strained ties with the other, relations between Japan and China substantially influenced U.S. policies in East Asia. The implications of the China factor on Japan's security calculus, for instance, had a significant impact on the U.S.-Japan security relationship (Przystup, "China and the U.S.-Japan Alliance", Lecture 2000). U.S. Undersecretary of State Robert B. Zoellick substantiates the interrelatedness of the three nations' security calculations. Zoellick said: "China is big, it is growing, and it will influence the world in the years ahead... the essential question is how the emphasis on Japan reflects an alliance-centric approach for managing change that invites a larger Japanese role in support of international order."⁶ But what is the "order" that was conducive to more stability in a volatile security environment as it existed in East Asia during the last decade of the twentieth century?

With respect to the full equation of the U.S.-China-Japan triangle, clashing political cultures and incongruent security interests during the two decades after the end of the Cold War highlighted differences between the three countries in the post-Cold War era. Tensions and conflicts in the region, such as North Korea's launch of a Rodong 1 Missile and a Satellite projectile over Japan respectively in 1993 and 1998, the North Korea controversial nuclear program and, last but not least, South Korea's security hazards emanating from the possible extension of the US nuclear umbrella to Seoul, all resulted from the power relations among and respective security calculations of the United

⁵ "WORLD ECONOMIC SITUATION AND PROSPECTS 2007", Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), The United Nations. January 2007, Full Text available at: <<http://www.un.org/esa/policy/wesp/wesp2007files/wesp2007.pdf>>

⁶The U.S. Undersecretary of State Robert B. Zoellick. "Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?" Remarks to National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, New York, NY, September 21, 2005. Also see Robert B. Zoellick's testimony before the House International Relations Committee, May 10, 2006.

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