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## **JAPAN'S EVOLVING RELATIONS WITH CHINA**

*Yoshio Okawara*

Last October, the 17th National Congress of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) concluded with the Hu Jintao administration starting its second term. The entire world, including Japan, is now paying attention to what kind of foreign policies China will pursue, at a time that China has demonstrated a phenomenal rise both economically and militarily.

*The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.*

## **The Rapprochement of Japan-China Relations**

Japan-China relations have been upgraded with the agreed term “a strategic mutually beneficial relationship” through the visit to China by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in October 2006 and the visit to Japan in April 2007 by Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. Both leaders agreed on the direction to be taken regarding several imminent issues such as the East China Sea gas field development issue, holding a high-level economic dialog, cooperating on environment and energy, inaugurating a joint research project on history, and military exchanges. Since then, all these issues have been addressed and developed in one way or another. In so doing, China’s policy to strengthen good-neighbor relations, which is one pillar of the “peaceful development” strategy, has made a step forward, since the relationship with Japan is the last impediment remaining unsettled in China’s bilateral relations with neighboring countries.

In the process of the rapprochement, it is, in particular, noteworthy to see how China dealt with the historical issue. It is evident that the Hu administration has strategically changed its policy on Japan, and that its core is history, especially its evaluation of the path on which Japan has proceeded since World War II. In his address to the Japanese Diet, Premier Wen expressed appreciation in clear terms for the first time for the deep remorse and apology the Japanese government had previously extended. It is also evident that China has been treating the historical issue in a considerably restrained manner since Abe’s visit to China.

## **China’s Multilateral Diplomacy in the Region**

China started to put emphasis on multilateral diplomacy several years ago, a new direction that clearly has been promoting regional cooperation towards building an East Asian community in the longer term. Its conclusion of an FTA agreement with ASEAN and active involvement in ARF as well as ASEAN+3 are the examples. The contribution China has made as the chair of the Six-Party Talks aiming at denuclearization of North Korea is a significant expression of intent to pursue a

peaceful development strategy in the region. SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) initiated by China is also among the products of its active multilateral diplomacy.

As was reported by General Secretary Hu at the 17th Party Congress, China is committed to strengthen good-neighbor relations and energetically engage in regional cooperation in order to create a peaceful and stable regional environment. This stance of China is a good opportunity for Japan. Japan and China, as partners in “a strategic mutually beneficial relationship,” should jointly work on creating a regional framework securing the region’s stability and prosperity. In particular, strengthening the ARF and creating an Asian version of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) would be conducive to prevent conflicts in East Asia where no effective security mechanism is in existence. In November 2007, the Japan-China-South Korea Summit was held in Singapore. This framework should be nurtured with particular care as an important vehicle to promote regional cooperation in Northeast Asia.


In terms of regional cooperation, as a whole, it should be noted that China has been proclaiming its policy not to seek “hegemony” in the region and that the trilateral dialog framework among Japan, the USA and China should be established, mindful of the importance of the US presence in all the areas of politics, economy, security, and so on, in the region.

### **Japan’s Foreign Policy toward China**

Although Japan-China relations, mocked as “politics cold, economy hot” during the Koizumi era, are now recovering like thawing ice, we are bound to face numerous conflicts and frictions, as the relations become intertwined deeper and broader. To cope with them, enhancing mutual understanding through unceasing candid dialog and interaction is essential at both government and private levels and in a wider range of areas of common concern. With regard to problems pending between Japan and China, the solution mechanism should be institutionalized so

that after official-level negotiations are exhausted, the highest level consultations will find a way out. The East China Sea gas field development is one such impending issue. In addressing the most sensitive historical issue, both sides should make objective analysis of facts and exercise self-restraint to minimize tensions, making full use of the Japan-China Joint History Research Committee established last year.

Furthermore, it is of extreme importance for both countries to strengthen the basis of economic ties through mutual efforts and to cooperate in common interest areas such as sustaining bilateral economic relations as well as energy, environment, sea-lane security, transnational crime prevention, and so on, in the way of embodying a “strategic mutually beneficial relationship.”

For these policies to be effectively and sustainably enforced, the attitude held by the public is very crucial as an underpinning of the bilateral relationship in the long run. With a view to recovering the extremely low rate of favorable opinion on both sides, for instance, the New Committee on 21st-century Japan-China Friendship now composed of knowledgeable people from private circles can be made use of. The Committee, if reinforced in such a way as adding government officials and enlarging its scope of work especially centering on mutual understanding among the youth, can serve as a strategic project for both sides. For this purpose, strategically strengthening cultural/personnel exchange, education, media and other effective measures in a long-term perspective can be considered as useful means. 

*Yoshio Okawara is President of the Institute for International Policy Studies (IIPS) in Tokyo. He was Ambassador of Japan to the United States between 1980 and 1985.*