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JAPAN – CHINA RELATIONS:

HOW TO BUILD A “STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP OF MUTUAL BENEFIT”?

Seiichiro Takagi

The term "strategic relationship of mutual benefit" has come to symbolize the improved relations between Japan and China in the past year or so. Being shorthand for a "mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests," this relationship was first mentioned and agreed to by the leaders of the two countries as a key concept in their future bilateral relations when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Beijing in October 2006, and was given shape when Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao visited Tokyo six months later.

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The “common strategic interests” identified by Japan and China can be divided into two types: reciprocal and identical. The former includes the two countries extending their support to each other’s peaceful development, enhancing mutual trust and cultivating mutual understanding and friendship between their two peoples. The latter – although some may be identical only in principle and differ in details – includes common development, peace and stability in Northeast Asia, peaceful settlement of the nuclear issues on the Korean Peninsula (especially its denuclearization), reform of the Security Council and the United Nations as a whole, support for ASEAN’s larger role and promotion of regional cooperation in East Asia.

To pursue these “common strategic interests,” a series of dialogues and exchanges, including summit meetings, took place in 2007: Prime Minister Abe met Chinese President Hu Jintao on the sidelines of the G8 Summit in Heiligendamm, Germany; Chinese Defense Minister Cao Gangchuan visited Japan; the new Japanese prime minister Yasuo Fukuda met Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao during the third East Asia Summit in Singapore; the Chinese missile destroyer *Shenzhen* made a port call to Japan; and the first Japan-China high-level economic dialogue was held in Beijing. Finally, when Mr. Fukuda visited Beijing at the end of last year, the leaders of the two countries agreed on concrete plans to promote youth exchanges and enhance cooperation in the areas of environment, energy, and science and technology, although they were unable to reach a compromise on the pending issue of gas exploration rights in the East China Sea.

However, we need to note the cold fact that these developments in dialogue and exchange have yet resulted in any significant improvement in how the Japanese and Chinese peoples see each other. According to a public opinion poll conducted by the Japanese Cabinet Office in October 2007, 63 percent of the respondents said they do not feel affinity toward China – the same level as two years ago. Similarly in China, there is no sign of any noticeable improvement in public sentiment toward Japan. The ongoing confusion over a case of food poisoning, in which Chinese-made frozen dumplings tainted with pesticide have

sickened a number of people in Japan, clearly shows how fragile mutual confidence is at the grassroots level.


More importantly, the “common strategic interests” list does not exhaust all the strategic interests of Japan and China. There are some strategic interests that cannot necessarily be shared by the two countries. Calmly realizing this fact and taking appropriate measures to deal with it is extremely important as Tokyo and Beijing strive to build a “strategic relationship of mutual benefit” from now on.

One of China’s strategic interests that is not included on the “common strategic interests” list is the unification of Taiwan. Some Japanese -- and a greater number of Taiwanese -- regard China’s claim that Taiwan is part of China as conflicting with Japan’s strategic interests. There is similar suspicion and fear in China as well. However, the strategic interests of Japan and China here are not necessarily of a conflicting nature. The Japanese government does not deny the importance of Taiwan’s reunification for China. It only demands that this be pursued through peaceful means. As long as the Chinese government seeks reunification by a “charm offensive” and not by the threat or use of force, it will not pose a challenge to Japan’s strategic interests.

One of Japan’s strategic interests that is not included on the “common strategic interests” list is the maintenance and strengthening of the Japan-US security alliance. Again, this should not be taken as conflicting with China’s strategic interests either.

To be sure, a strengthened Japan-US alliance does not go well with China’s strategic aim of building a multipolar world. The dissolution of the bilateral alliance, however, should hardly be seen as a favorable option for China, which believes such an event would nudge Japan into going nuclear, albeit there are possibilities that a more independent Japan might contribute to the formation of a multipolar world. For China, a desirable Japan-US alliance might be something like a married couple “who argue all the time but will never divorce.” Japan, of course, will never seek such a relationship.

The 1996 Japan-US joint declaration recognized the continued importance of the bilateral security alliance, saying it is indispensable to the defense of Japan and the maintenance of regional stability in the emerging post-Cold War environment. The scope of the alliance has since been steadily expanded and deepened. Yet just as the 1996 declaration clearly states, both Japan and the United States have no intention of harming China's constructive strategic interests. I hope the Fukuda government, which advocates "synergy" between the Japan-US alliance and its Asia policy, will prove this by seeking cooperation with both the US and China with the common Sino-Japanese strategic goal of East Asian stability in mind.

Needless to say, differences in Japanese and Chinese strategic interests are not limited to these areas. However, we should not let differences hinder bilateral efforts to pursue and expand "common strategic interests." To build a "strategic relationship of mutual benefit," Japan and China must exercise wisdom and endeavor to manage differences, while attempting to realize and expand their common strategic interests. 

Seiichiro Takagi is Professor at the School of International Politics, Economics and Business at Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo, and Senior Adjunct Fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs.