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AN EAST ASIAN COMMUNITY AND JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

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Since the end of the Cold War, the most important strategic relationship in East Asia has been and will continue to be the one between the United States and China. Given this profound reality, Japan is obviously a lesser strategic player, and it is a fundamental mistake, both analytically and policy-wise, to treat Japan as one of the “four great powers” (including Russia) in Northeast Asia.

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Looking from this perspective, one would also realize the fundamental differences between Japan's and China's perspectives on evolving regionalism in East Asia, including the concept of an East Asian Community. China's regional outlook and its policies are still conditioned, at the deepest level, by its preoccupation with the "modern" elements of diplomacy and international politics, including strong nationalism, a sense of rivalry with the United States, an unprecedented pace and scale of military modernization, and preoccupation with territorial integrity.

Japan's perspective on East Asian regionalism and its interests therein, in contrast, are essentially "post-industrial," including commitment to non-traditional security issues such as human security, problems common to rapidly evolving civil societies, and issues associated with aging societies. Of course, there are still "modern" elements in Japanese society and politics, which particularly tend to surface in an emotional vicious cycle over historical and territorial issues between Japan and China. The main story in the evolution of Japanese diplomacy and thinking toward East Asian regionalism, however, has been largely, if not exclusively, a "post-modern" and "post-industrial" one.

The first critical and explicit manifestation of this tendency was Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's policy speech in January 2002 proposing the establishment of an East Asian Community. Koizumi said to the audience in Singapore that, starting from Japan-ASEAN cooperation, "the countries of ASEAN, Japan, China, the Republic of Korea, Australia and New Zealand will be core members of such a community." The Koizumi speech actually ignited a process of conceptual competition between China and Japan. In particular, the inclusion of Australia and New Zealand embodied the line of division between the two. In the Japanese thinking, there still remains a concern about a China-centered process of community-building possibly developing into a closed region, reflecting Chinese preoccupation with "modern" values and interests such as national sovereignty and a sense of strategic rivalry vis-à-vis the United States over the long run.

In this Japanese conception, the inclusion of Australia and New Zealand holds a double function. First, they provide a venting channel leading to the

United States as a security anchor in East Asia, an important foundation of an East Asian Community from the Japanese perspective. Secondly, the membership of Australia and New Zealand is also important from the point of view of universal values that will sustain, as well as keep open, the basis of an East Asian Community to the rest of the world.


Therefore, behind the competition over the primary institution for community building between the ASEAN+3 formula, on the one hand, and the East Asian Summit or the ASEAN+6 on the other, lies this conceptual rivalry, if not geopolitical conflict, between Japan and China. This should be a healthy competition in which the other East Asian nations, including the Japanese and the Chinese, would be involved through constructive dialogue and debate.

For such diplomatic approaches by Japan toward East Asia, the Japan-Australia Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation, signed in March 2007, has important meanings. The actual context of the declaration reveals that the agreement is the embodiment of security cooperation between countries concerned about a set of non-traditional security and political issues. The declaration has no elements regarding traditional security such as territorial integrity or balance of power considerations. It specifically mentions Japan-Australia cooperation on non-traditional security issues, including law enforcement to combat transnational crime, disarmament and counter-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, peace operations, and humanitarian relief operations.

From the perspective advanced in this essay, one would realize that similar security cooperation should not be entirely impossible between Japan and South Korea. Indeed, if Japan and South Korea can establish a genuinely cooperative relationship as true equals located between the United States and China, this will become an epoch-making trigger for a paradigm shift in East Asian regionalism. Under the dominant realities today, this perspective may sound rather normative. Nonetheless, it is not entirely without substance, as evidenced by rapidly expanding civil society exchanges between Japan and South Korea and the coordination of alliance policies toward the United States.

Although it is a bit too early to judge where the new diplomacy by the

Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) will go, there are indications that this sort of paradigm shift may not be entirely impossible in the coming years. Of particular importance is Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama's emphasis on Japan's diplomacy toward neighboring countries, i.e., South Korea and China, in the overall context of an East Asian Community concept. The idea is to start the community-building efforts with Japan's most troubled relationships, i.e., those with South Korea and China, and his rather explicit approach to the history problems represents an important initiative in this overall context of a new East Asian diplomacy rather than simply in a bilateral context.

Unfortunately, PM Hatoyama is currently busy handling the troubled relationship with the United States. Naturally, DPJ diplomacy should give priority to putting back in order the alliance relationship with the United States, which is indispensable for Japan to cope with and tranquilize the "modern" elements of international politics and security in East Asia. There would then be a better chance for Japan to push for an East Asian Community that is open and committed to the values important for human life rather than traditional national security. Over the long run, there should also be a chance that Chinese society will continue to evolve, although surely with ups and downs, toward accepting and coexisting with such a Community in East Asia. 

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