

What Shapes the Triangle?

Strategic Priorities and Trust in U.S.-Japan-China Relations
Leif-Eric Easley, Harvard University Department of Government
Issues and Insights, Vol. 6, No. 8 (May 2006), pp. 11-14.

A joke recently made its rounds of the East Asia conference circuit, likening the U.S.-Japan relationship to a marriage. The punch line – something about China being the mistress – at first got a few laughs, but the more one thinks about it, the less funny it becomes. The question is often asked: what is the most important bilateral relationship in East Asia, U.S.-Japan or U.S.-China? This essay addresses the question in three parts. First, I outline the key related issues causing this question to be so frequently raised. Then I argue what really shapes the U.S.-Japan-China triangle is not the relative importance of bilateral relations, but rather national strategic priorities and bilateral trust. Finally, I consider challenges for international trust discussed at the Trilateral Security Seminar in Osaka and how these might be overcome.

First of all, debates over the relative importance of the United States' relations with Japan and China generally raise three groups of vital issues:

- Japan's fears about abandonment and entrapment

Long at issue in the U.S.-Japan alliance are abandonment fears from the "Nixon shock" to President Clinton's "Japan-passing" and entrapment fears from the era of Vietnam to the present day where "areas surrounding Japan" may include Taiwan. On the one hand, Japan worries about being left out in the cold as the U.S. engages China. On the other, Japan worries about being dragged by America into a conflict with its continental neighbor.

- China's increasing significance in international affairs

For so long it was Japan that was the ascending power to be reckoned with. Now, all eyes are on China. With the rapidly growing Chinese economy and commensurate military and political influence, policymakers, business leaders and academics have shifted their focus to U.S.-China relations. Meanwhile, China is consciously stepping into the spotlight, demanding international respect and attention.

- America's role in East Asia

The matter of relative importance of U.S.-Japan and U.S.-China relations also raises questions about the United States' role in the region. Is that role primarily to stabilize the political-military environment? Or is America's Cold War role giving way to one focused on expanding trade, increasing investment, and opening markets? What about spreading freedom by promoting democracy and human rights?

These issues warrant all the attention policy analysts can muster. But while the question of weighing bilateral relationships raises such vital points, the labeling of either U.S.-Japan or U.S.-China relations as more important than the other sounds to me like playground politics. "You're my best friend, even better than my other best friends." "I pick you first to be on my team." Playground politics reflect human needs for affirmation for feeling secure and proud. States,

being made up of and led by people, exhibit similar behavior. In fact, psychological approaches have taught us much about international relations by focusing on the fears and reputations of states.¹ Important as fear and reputation may be, I argue it is necessary to dig deeper than playground politics because the U.S.-Japan-China triangle is most significantly shaped by strategic priorities and trust.

The strategic priorities of the United States, Japan and China apparently have a good deal in common concerning regional stability. The free flow of goods and services, the confidence of investors, and the low costs of cooperation that come with stability are so valuable to these economies, the three governments can be considered locked in the same car on the same road.² Each government wants good relations with Southeast Asia, wants to minimize the threat of terrorism, wants a peaceful resolution to the North Korean nuclear crisis, wants free navigation of the seas, and so on. Many contentious issues, from currency revaluation to trade imbalances, even access to natural resources, can be approached in positive-sum terms, based on shared strategic priorities. The outlying matter is of course Taiwan, as the island's sovereignty appears zero-sum, at least for the time being. But even on this issue we see cooperation in the form of coordinated restraint because the U.S., Japan and China prize stability.

In terms of present strategic priorities, the triangle may be a tight equilateral, to the benefit of all three parties. When it comes to long-term strategic goals however, there is much less agreement. To phrase them bluntly: what are the boundaries of Beijing's ambitions for greater national strength? China as a regional power? Global power? Super-power? What will Japan's new international role look like once it fully unfolds? Humanitarian aid leader? UN peacekeeper? Coalition of the willing supporter? War-fighting ally? And how willing is the United States to share global political influence and leadership? Is it ready to accept a more independent Japanese foreign policy? Is it prepared to compromise with Chinese interests? Competing designs on the future present great uncertainty, and this is where trust comes in. These questions are not nearly as much a problem for states that trust each other. Simply put, trust is what is shaping the U.S.-Japan-China triangle. The United States and Japan trust each other, whereas the U.S. and China and Japan and China do not.³ We in fact have a loose isosceles triangle that is not as cooperative or beneficial as it could be. Two questions immediately follow: why is this so and what can be done about it?

Lack of trust can be attributed to three factors: unresolved historical antagonisms, unclear present intentions, and undeveloped common vision for the region's future. The first point involves

¹ The classic example is Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton University Press, 1976; Jervis is especially known for his work on security dilemmas motivated by fear of vulnerability. For an argument about the limits to which reputation matters, see Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics*, Cornell University Press, 1996. For extensive coverage of psychological applications, see Rose McDermott, *Political Psychology in International Relations*, University of Michigan Press, 2004.

² I have previously used this metaphor to mean that the U.S., Japan and China have no choice but to deal with each other and avoid military conflict (locked in the same car) and are inexorably tied in the process of globalization (on the same road).

³ For recent insights on trust in international relations, see Andrew H. Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, Princeton University Press, 2005; and Aaron M. Hoffman, *Building Trust: Overcoming Suspicion in International Conflict*, State University of New York Press, 2006.

legacies of the Pacific War, accusations that Japan has not atoned for its imperial past, charges that the Chinese Communist Party has not come clean about its actions, and sentiment that America is responsible for division of the Chinese nation. Unclear intentions surround China's nontransparent and large-scale military modernization and the post-Cold War upgrade of the U.S.-Japan security alliance. Finally, there is no common vision for the region's future: will it be a free trade area? Will there be a unified Korea? Will Taiwan receive international space and recognition? Will the people of Asia enjoy freedom with human rights protected under the rule of law? Will ASEAN speak with a single voice? Will China reassume its traditional role at the center? There is simply no clear configuration of the region for the future; Cold War lines die hard in East Asia.

What can be done about this, what are the policy implications? Common prescriptions place responsibility squarely on Beijing's shoulders: China needs to explain its military modernization, become more transparent, and move toward democracy. This is a rather asymmetric roadmap. It is also important that while Japan and the United States reform their alliance for new roles and missions in a new security environment, they ensure that the alliance provides assistance and not obstacles for bridging regional divides.⁴ Already underway is increasing economic integration, producing more productive interactions and greater common interests that can build trust. As the U.S., Japan and China together belong to more international institutions and accumulate a longer history of cooperation, they will build trust. But what is most important to increase trust, and what is most urgent for stabilizing triangular relations, is the better management of nationalism.

State leaders must not rely on divisive nationalism which devalues the other for the sake of their own legitimacy. This is a major problem as China fills the hole left by communism with nationalism, as Japan fills the hole left by its economic miracle with nationalism, and as the United States responds to internal frictions from globalization with economic nationalism (patriotic protectionism). Nationalism must be tamed and national histories made more balanced to build trust in the region and constructively refigure the U.S.-Japan-China triangle. Until then, it is most likely that the U.S.-Japan relationship will remain closer and deeper than that between China and the United States. Closer and deeper relationships based on trust are more important to maintain and more important when it comes to engaging in serious policy coordination. On the other hand, the U.S.-China relationship is the most important in the world to carefully manage and develop. There is simply too much at stake.

This was clear at the Trilateral Security Seminar in Osaka where the value of good working relations was emphasized and much time was spent discussing issues of trust under the subject headings I outlined above: unresolved historical antagonisms, unclear present intentions, and undeveloped common vision for the region's future. Under historical issues, the focus was the Japanese Prime Minister's visits to Yasukuni Shrine. These visits appear to be increasing nationalism in which Japanese and Chinese demonize the other and each side sees their nationalism as reacting against the provocations of the other. Because how a nation deals with the past suggests how it will behave in the future, Yasukuni has become a source of distrust and a virtual diplomatic wall such that Japan and China are not even talking at the highest levels.

⁴ Leif-Eric Easley, "Avoiding Cold War II: Upgrading the U.S.-Japan Alliance and Bridging Regional Divides," *Issues and Insights*, Vol. 6, No. 6 (March 2006), pp. 63-68.

Discussion of unclear state intentions included three major points. First, if it becomes clear that Beijing's moral-historical confrontation with Tokyo is strategic, this may raise serious questions about China's peaceful rise. Second, third party states inevitably infer something from the friends you keep, in reference to Beijing's relationships with particular regimes in Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. Third, comments were made about increasing military capabilities, their purpose, and the transparency of defense spending programs. As I wrote before the conference, I find such points about intentions tend to focus on China when we must also consider interpretations of Japanese and American intentions regarding Japan's Article 9 debate, America's democracy promotion agenda, and the two countries upgrading their security alliance.

Conference sessions also addressed the undeveloped common vision for East Asia's future in three parts. First, several major paradigms were outlined: U.S. hegemonic stability, China's new security concept, and ASEAN driven regional integration. Where these (and other possible visions) overlap or conflict have important implications for trust. It was pointed out that Franco-German trust-building and reconciliation was embedded in European regionalization, suggesting that better Sino-Japanese relations may require a deeper institutional context, especially given the current historical experiment of simultaneously strong Chinese and Japanese nations. This fed into a second discussion about East Asia community building where attention focused on the role of values. Two camps – one arguing that community building should proceed based on shared interests with value systems finding "harmony in diversity" and the other arguing that community building without shared values would ultimately be shallow and lead to conflict – demonstrated political systems' distrust of each other. Third and finally, there was discussion of regional leadership where American, Japanese and Chinese participants all played down their country's possible role as a regional leader. All sides appeared sensitive to the reasons the other two may not trust their country in a position of greater leadership.

The conference was thus rich in discussions of trust issues in Northeast Asia and provoked me to add two additional points to my analysis: that national pride must be viewed in more positive-sum terms and that leaders must exercise the political will necessary for better relations. While mistrust may be deep-seeded in identity issues, nationalism can be better managed and governments can focus on complementary national comparative advantages instead of attacking the worth of another country. And overlapping strategic visions can be acted upon by leaders only once they are willing to step out of the corner they have painted themselves into.

It is not surprising that participants at Japan-U.S. bilateral meetings cite their relationship as the most important, or that Sino-U.S. relations are labeled the most important at their bilateral conferences. It is not even surprising that some individuals make these claims at both conferences! What I am suggesting is that we get beyond the playground politics to what will really shape the security landscape in East Asia: the strategic priorities of states and the trusting relationships among them. The United States, Japan and China need to pursue their strategic priorities in ways that avoid conflict and build trust. It's not so funny to think of U.S.-Japan-China relations as a love triangle. Love triangles usually end up badly. I prefer to think of the three countries as traveling together on a road trip. Locked in the same car together, it's just a matter of whose turn it is to drive, who packs the sandwiches and who is willing to stop and ask for directions.