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October 2006

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National Defense College of the Philippines

EXECUTIVE POLICY BRIEF

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Alileen San Pablo-Bavierra, PhD*

East Asia Community Building

The concept of East Asia as a prospective regional community composed of the ASEAN countries, China, Japan, and Korea, traces its roots to the 2000 proposal by a Korean scholar of an “East Asia Economic Community” and its establishment only in 1997, when the leaders of the ASEAN + 3 countries held their first summit in the midst of the Asian Financial Crisis.

Annual summits and consultations among the foreign ministers, and the formation of an East Asia Study Group followed, putting forward specific recommendations for cooperation. A number of ASEAN + 3 agreements have also been concluded covering certain functional areas.

The Central Role of ASEAN

ASEAN has occupied a central position in such efforts to build multilateral cooperation, with regional and trans-regional networks (e.g. ASEAN Regional Forum, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation), ASEAN + 3, and others centered on strong bilateral ties between ASEAN on the one hand and its dialogue partners on the other.

With respect to ASEAN + 3, it is clear that ASEAN’s relations with the “4+3” countries have been developing unevenly, with ASEAN-China ties rapidly becoming institutionalized through a series of wide-ranging agreements, including a proposed China-ASEAN Free Trade Area by 2020, while Japan was hard put to match the number of new initiatives being put forward by China. Korea, though initially very active in supporting the East Asian community concept during Kim Dae Jung’s leadership, for now appears to be less of a stakeholder compared to the other two northeast Asian giants.

The China-Japan Challenge

One of the most serious challenges to building an East Asian community composed of the ASEAN + 3 countries has been the difficult relations between China and Japan.

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Visit the NDCP Website at www.ndcp.edu.ph
Japan's Perceptions and Concerns about China

Since the end of World War II, the restoration of friendly relations between China and Japan was constrained by the Cold War and Japan's security dependence on the United States. Nonetheless, a generally favorable opinion of and public interest in China prevailed in Japan.

The looming China "threat" in the 1990s became evident through a series of events. These included the 1991 violent repression of anti-government demonstrators in Tiananmen Square, and the 1995 Taiwan Straits missile exercises by China, which were intended to intimidate the Taiwanese people into voting against pro-independence presidential candidate Lee Teng Hui; and the 1999 conduct of nuclear tests by China. Japanese perceptions of China and the Chinese sank to even lower depths in 2005, when inexplicably violent anti-Japanese demonstrations over China's claim to the Yasukuni shrine - a memorial to Japan's war dead - swept through major cities in China.

Concerns over China's Rapid Growth

Although lower in intensity, there were also concerns by Japan over the damaging environmental impact of China's rapid growth, competition for access to natural resources in general and oil and gas in particular, and fear of transnational crime and refugee spillovers originating from China should internal crises occur.

It was moreover likely that underlying the increasing suspicions toward China by the Japanese elite was the anxiety that China's economic success would undercut Japan's position as the region's pre-eminent economic power.

Japan's 4 China Dilemmas

Japan currently faces a number of dilemmas in its relations with China.

First: Japan supports China's economic growth and development through massive ODA and investments, and yet this growth is leading to a stronger China over which Japan will have declining influence.

Second: China's leaders insist that Japan has not shown its remorse for its World War II sins, and therefore they continue to exploit Japan's war guilt as leverage in bilateral relations. On the other hand, what Japan sees as China's manipulation of the historical issue makes it even more difficult for Japanese leaders to apologize and face the past squarely.

Third: Perceptions of a hostile China increase Japan's sense of military insecurity and therefore encourage its security dependence on the United States, but Japan's deepening alliance with the United States tends to reinforce China's hostility.

Fourth: Chinese nationalism has been growing recently, its most visible manifestation being an anti-Japanese popular movement directed against Japan's own conservatives and nationalists. But this Chinese nationalism is feeding a more radical anti-Chinese sentiment among many Japanese.

The ODA Debate

These dilemmas have crystallized in a debate over Japan's ODA policy toward China. One school of thought says that ODA should cease because it in effect subsidizes China's military modernization, has not helped improve political relations between the two sides, and is no longer needed by China following its high growth pattern. The other school of thought contends that ODA helps alone for Japan's wartime sin, will help cement the bilateral friendship and increase mutual interdependence, and should continue because after all, a prosperous and stable China will be good for the region.

China's Perceptions and Concerns about Japan

Chinese perceptions of Japan continue to be shaped by memories of war and occupation, which account for their suspicion about Japan's regional and global ambitions. These historically-rooted perceptions have been aggravated by Koizumi's policies of visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, the decision to send troops abroad in the aftermath of 9-11, and support for a rewriting of Japan's "peace constitution" in favor of Japan's participation in collective self-defense. Statements by high-level Japanese officials downplaying the significance and scale of the so-called "Nanjing massacres" in the 1930s by Japanese soldiers, also riled the Chinese.

A "Remilitarizing" Japan

Chinese leaders do not perceive a significant increase in Japan's military hostility against them in the last decade, particularly evidenced by the 1996 Defense White Paper of Japan which expressed, for the first time, a need to "keep a close watch on China"; the 1996 Japan-US Joint Declaration on Security Alliance in the 21st Century; and the 2007 Japan-US Security Guidelines Agreement which expanded the scope of the alliance to "situations in areas surrounding Japan." Japan's role in the United States' Theater Missile Defense system also threatens to undercut China's own missile defense program. In the middle of China's concerns about Japan's alliance with the United States is the issue of Japan's close relations with Taiwan, its former colony, and Japan's potential support for Taiwan's independence.

The Psychology of Sino-Japan Relations

If one were to take a longer and more multidimensional view of the relations, there also appear to be cultural and psychological barriers to Japan's better ties with China. Embedded in China's Confucian hierarchical worldview is a sense of betrayal by its "younger brother" Japan, who - after borrowing much from Chinese culture and civilization - subsequently surpassed China in economic and technological achievement. It also reminded Japan of its own discomfort and now continues to look at the communist regime as inferior. In this context, what China demands of Japan is not only that it remain non-militarist, but that it acknowledge China's equal place as a regional power.

Implications for East Asian Community Building

The success of any East Asian community building project will obviously require Sino-Japanese cooperation on all fronts. Although ASEAN may benefit in the short term from Sino-Japanese competition for its allegiance, in the final analysis regional peace, security and prosperity becomes unattainable if such competition should prevail.

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