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Feature Article
THE JAPAN-U.S.-CHINA TRIANGLE UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT
Michael J. Green

The Japan-U.S.-China strategic triangle is carefully watched across East Asia as the touchstone for regional peace and stability. A U.S.-Japan alliance that overtly seeks to contain China risks a dangerous scramble for Cold War style alignments across the region. A U.S.-China relationship that is too close risks marginalizing Japan and the other middle and small powers with her. A Japan-China relationship that is too close puts the forward U.S. military presence at risk. Most states in Asia—not to mention Tokyo, Washington and Beijing—have therefore preferred to keep the triangle stable. And so all eyes are now on Tokyo as Japan’s new prime minister, Yukio Hatoyama, promises to put his own unique stamp on Japan’s relationships with the United States and China.

Hatoyama’s formula for strategic triangle is somewhat crude and simple. He told the Washington Post that he seeks to use the U.S.-Japan alliance to balance China’s growing security threat and Japan’s relationship with China and Asia to balance the pernicious effects of U.S.-style capitalism. The latter theme is part of the Democratic Party of Japan’s (DPJ) broader indictment of Junichiro Koizumi’s “neocon” approach to the economy; an approach that gave Japan annual growth rates above the OECD average while Koizumi was in power, but also widened the gap between rich and poor (which are still well below the OECD average, but painful nonetheless for Japan’s comparatively egalitarian political economy). The theme of using Asia to “balance” the West is also a perennial in Japanese domestic politics with roots going back to the pan-Asian idealism of the Meiji modernizers and the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere during the Second World War. In the post-war era, Hatoyama’s own grandfather, Ichiro Hatoyama, prime minister from the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in 1955. This was not because the Soviets were popular—tens of thousands of Japanese prisoners of war were held for years in Soviet gulags—but rather because Hatoyama the elder sought to reduce Japan’s reliance on the United States. He also emphasized the Chinese military’s role in internal and international disaster relief operations.

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(continued on p. 2)
Hatoyama has been attracted to the Asianist theme from his earliest days in the Diet. In the 1990s he formed a study group that included commentators like Jitsuro Terashima who wrote in popular weekly magazines that Japan should seek an “equidistant” relationship between the United States and China in order to balance American unipolarity. More recently, he pulled into his orbit former Vice Minister of Finance Eisuke Sakakibara, the architect of the failed “Asian Monetary Fund” proposal in the wake of the 1997-98 financial crisis. Koizumi’s own foreign policy vision also opened political space for Hatoyama and the DPJ to argue for more balanced relations with Asia. Since 1957 all Japanese prime ministers opened the Diet by declaring that Japan’s foreign policy would be based on the triad of the U.S.-Japan alliance, the UN System, and relations with Asia, but beginning in 2001, Koizumi declared that Japan’s foreign policy would be based on only two pillars — “the U.S.-Japan alliance and international solidarity” — an implicit rebuke to the Asianists and assertion of Japan’s global ambitions.

Thus, in the broader sweep of Japanese history and politics, Hatoyama’s seemingly crude description of how to use the United States and China against each other has compelling logic—at least to domestic audiences. But does it have any traction in the region?

The flagship of Hatoyama’s new relationship with Asia and China is his call for an East Asia Community (EAC). The first thing that has to be said about the EAC is that it is not new. Koizumi himself signed up to the vision of an East Asia Community at summits with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Korea and China back in 2005. The Chinese, Koreans and others are therefore wondering if Hatoyama has something different in mind this time. His Foreign Minister, Katsuya Okada, initially announced that the EAC should include Australia, New Zealand and India in addition to the original “ASEAN Plus Three” (Japan, Korea and China). This was Koizumi’s original formula as well as being the composition of the East Asia Summit. The whole purpose of expanding the number of democratic states was to limit China’s influence within the grouping. Not surprisingly, Beijing reacted coolly to Okada’s membership proposal, prompting Okada and Hatoyama to state that it may be too soon to say who exactly would be in the grouping. Then after a strongly negative reaction from the Obama administration over Tokyo’s initial claim that the EAC would exclude the United States, Hatoyama again backtracked and left open the possibility of U.S. participation.

If the form of the EAC is unclear, the function is even fuzzier. In general the focus is on trade agreements, but the current Japanese coalition has steered clear of liberalizing agriculture, so most Japanese FTA negotiations will probably stay on a slow track. There has been some significant financial cooperation, including agreements to institutionalize the Chiangmai Initiative’s debt swap arrangements among the ASEAN Plus Three, but Beijing and Tokyo are jockeying for leadership in that process and the global nature of the financial crisis has kept the focus on the IMF and G-20. China and Japan are also on opposite sides of the question of what norms should guide an East Asia Community. Beijing has argued that the EAC should enshrine the “non-interference” principle, but the mainstream view in Japan is that regional integration must lead to stronger accountability and rule of law within all member nations.

The Japanese public also appears wary of the “China” card. In the most recent opinion polls taken by the Japanese government, 76% of the public support the U.S.-Japan alliance and 73% said they feel “close” to America. In the same poll, 66% of the public said they did not feel close to China and 72% said they would oppose any effort to form an alliance (continued on p. 3)
with China. The Japanese public and political elite had a much more benign view of China during the Cold War, but over the last two decades the expansion of PLA military activities around Japan; Beijing’s opposition to Japanese efforts to win a permanent UN Security Council seat; and repeated environmental and food safety scares emanating from China (most recently poison dumplings) have put China more solidly in the “threat” category, even though Japan has traded more with China than the United States for four years now.

Beijing may also be in for some unpleasant surprises with the new government in Tokyo. Hatoyama’s pledge to play down the history issue will be welcome in China and Korea, but the DPJ is a more populist party than the LDP and will be tempted to exploit popular anger at whatever transgression China might commit in the lead-up to the Upper House election next summer. Given its “anti-bureaucracy” brand, the DPJ is also much closer to Japan’s small civil society and NGO movement, which could bring an unfamiliar new dimension to the relationship for Beijing. Hatoyama is chair of the Diet Members League in support of Aung San Suu Kyi and some of Hatoyama’s close lieutenants have said he may be the first Prime Minister to meet with the Dalai Lama. There are also reports that in their first face-to-face meeting, Foreign Minister Okada and China’s Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi clashed over Xinjiang and Tibet.

If Hatoyama is not careful, his formula of using China and the United States to balance each other may end up alienating Japan from both. However, these are still early days for the new Japanese government and the hangover of campaign rhetoric has not yet cleared. The DPJ is also obsessed with preparations for the Upper House election next summer, which could knock the LDP out for another four years. Going into the election, Hatoyama’s primary focus will be on redistributing the budget at home to favor DPJ constituencies over the LDP. In terms of foreign policy, he just needs to look competent and avoid too many obvious examples that he is backing away from his campaign promises (never a good thing when you are in the middle of making a whole new series of campaign promises). In short, there will probably be a lot of dodging and weaving and very little real national security strategy for the next year. What happens after that depends on the result of the Upper House election. Judging from the basic structure of international relations in East Asia and domestic public opinion within Japan, there will probably be far more continuity than change in Japan’s approach to China and the United States. But then again, we are in terra incognita for Japanese politics.

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Publications from the Freeman Chair 2009*

*Please visit our Web site to access archived publications dating back to 2002.

**October**

• “China’s Health amidst the Global Economic Crisis: Potential Effects and Challenges,” CSIS, October 19, 2009. By Charles Freeman III, Chairholder, and Xiaoqing Lu Boynton, Research Associate, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS

• “Is China Ready to Challenge the Dollar?: Internationalization of the Renminbi and Its Implications for the United States,” CSIS, October 19, 2009. By Melissa Murphy, Senior Fellow, and Wen Jin Yuan, Research Intern, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS


**September**

• “China’s eye on African agriculture,” Asia Times, October 2, 2009. By Carl Rubinstein, Research Assistant, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS


• “Obama’s Decision on Tariffs is Calculated Cynicism,” Financial Times, September 13, 2009. By Charles W. Freeman III, Chairholder, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS

**July**


**April**


**March**

• China’s Capacity to Manage Infectious Diseases: Global Implications, CSIS Freeman Chair in China Studies, March 31, 2009. Project Director: Charles W. Freeman III, Chairholder, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS. Project Editor: Xiaoqing Lu, Research Associate, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS

CONFERENCE AND EVENT

• October 26 “CSIS Statesmen’s Forum: General Xu Caihou”

Chinese **General Xu Caihou**, Vice Chairman of the Communist Party of China’s Central Military Commission, spoke at the CSIS Statesmen’s forum. **Dr. John Hamre**, President and CEO of CSIS, delivered introductory remarks. **Charles W. Freeman III**, Chairholder of the CSIS Freeman Chair in China Studies, moderated the discussion. General Xu outlined the versatility and growth of the PLA, while focusing on the PLA’s efforts and accomplishments in disaster relief. General Xu tied these developments to the greater context of Chinese foreign policy and Sino-U.S. relations.

For event video, please click [here](#).

WHAT'S NEW


We are also pleased to welcome **Li Weijian** to join CSIS as a visiting fellow with the Freeman Chair in China Studies. Professor Li is also Director and Senior Fellow of Department of West Asian and African Studies at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS). He is also Standing Council Member of China Association for Middle East Studies. He received his Ph.D. at SISU. Professor Li’s research interests focus on Middle East politics, energy, culture and China-Middle East relations.

FREEMAN FACTS

**2010 Shanghai World Expo**

1. The Expo expects to host a total of approximately **70 million** visitors, of whom **10 million** will be foreign visitors.

2. There are over **200** participants in the Expo, which include countries, corporations, and organizations.

3. The Expo is scheduled for May 1 to October 31, 2010, totaling **184 days**.

4. The Chinese government has provided **$100 million** for the development of the Expo site.

5. The United States pavilion will cost approximately **$61 million**, which will be raised through the private sector. The USA pavilion will cover 6,000 square meters, and is expected to attract **5-6 million** visitors.

Source: Official website of the USA Pavilion

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