Political Moves Continue to be Made in the China-Japan-US Triangle

The situation in the Asia Pacific fundamentally depends on a system of relations within a strategic triangle, with the three leading regional and world powers — the United States, China and Japan — at each of the three corners of the triangle. This thesis needs a little clarification before we move on.

Firstly, this geometry could well evolve into a quadrilateral with four vertices if India were to be included. But it is not quite clear whether this evolution will take place in the near or distant future. What we can comment on at this stage is the rhetoric on New Delhi’s interest to increase its engagement and extend its influence from the Indo Pacific out into the wider Asia Pacific region. This rhetoric was heard in the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s speech at the last year’s annual IISS Asia Security Summit: The Shangri-La Dialogue, which was held in Singapore in June 2018. It would appear that similar statements which were made in the beginning of April this year were to go beyond rhetoric, with India’s Ministry of External Affairs setting up the “Indo Pacific wing” in a strong show of intent.

Secondly, it is high time for Japan to stop frequently making ludicrous qualifications, which essentially boil down to Japan more or less asserting its role as a US puppet (similarly to Germany). Of all the arguments Japan uses to reaffirm its relations with the US, only one is true: The United States and Japan are indeed bound by a military and political union, which the countries continue to define as the cornerstone of their bilateral relations.
At the same time, Japan and the US both pursue their own goals, which may partially coincide. For example, when the objective is to curb China’s military and political dominance. The presence of a US contingent of troops on Japanese territory has all but reached the top of the country’s agenda today (we would like to emphasize this), which Japan itself is interested in.

However, there is no ruling out the possibility that the Asia Pacific will experience a transformation similar to what has occurred in Europe over the past 30 years, which has made people question whether NATO is still relevant. Artificial incentives prop this organization up for it to continue to exist, of which the bubble of “Russian threat” is the main one. The bubble is blown across border states such as Ukraine and the Baltic States where it is inflated.

In order for a positive structure to form in the Asia Pacific, several interrelated trends need to be further developed to help each state at each of the three “corners” of the political triangle to gain a greater understanding of the other corners and of each other’s intentions, to ultimately create an atmosphere of trust on all three sides and in the overall geometry.

Firstly, it would be a great help if the Trump doctrine could be logically worked out so that it could be understood, which as it stands is nothing more than a political embodiment of the central idea put forward by neo-isolationists, where the image of the “American city upon the hill” is attractive in and of itself and does not need to be supported with military campaigns abroad that aim to spread democracy. The main obstacle which stands in the way of a clear Trump doctrine may stem from the American defense industry, which would be the first victim should the scale of the country’s involvement in external quarrels be reduced and if the artificially inflated defense budget is cut. The US President and his administration need to find something useful to keep Trump’s most loyal voters occupied, the Americans who are working hard on production lines for the companies driving the defense industry. A compromise could be found by following the example of post-war Germany, when the German defense industry was revived and the bulk of these companies sold what they produced abroad.

Secondly, Washington (and other capitals) also need to accept that China and Japan are going to be independent players in the regional (and global) political game, and will be playing at the highest level. The reason why China will be such a strong player hardly needs to be explained here, and Japan’s position has already been clarified.

As Beijing and Tokyo are playing an increasingly important role in regional and global affairs, it would be in Washington’s interest to make the process of inevitably equalizing relations with these states relatively smooth, without making any excessive demands. Today’s problems with trade are at the center of this process, and Washington’s demands from both major trading partners seem quite justified.

However, it is important to remember, both Beijing and Tokyo do recognize that these problems exist and are willing to address them in a constructive dialog. But these problems which have been mounting for decades essentially stem from Cold War realities. At that time, the US which was most heavily involved in the “fight against communism” covered almost all the costs, leaving its expensive allies and states they crossed paths with (China was one of these states at the time) to become richer as their economies grew, largely supported by and at the expense of the Americans.

In theory it is possible to solve these problems in the “here and now” format which Donald Trump is demanding. But a high-speed solution negotiated by twisting arms will inevitably have a negative impact on the economies of China and Japan, and will also trigger Japan’s feelings towards Washington which it has kept hidden so far. Furthermore, as growth of the world’s factory — in the modern Chinese economy — begins to slow, China’s partners which include the United States are already feeling the negative impact.

So far, the main result of several rounds of China-US talks on the massive deficit in US trade with China (which increased from $ 375 billion in 2017 to 420 billion dollars in 2018, despite last year's defensive measures), have been the US President’s optimistic tweets of “great success”.

It must be reiterated that we may well see this “Success”. When documents are signed that record this success, there will be handshakes and smiles. But only one side will have a reason for a sincere smile, the Americans, who are simply uncompromising and have nothing to yield to their Chinese partners. The figures that have been cited in this article clearly demonstrate this.

Only China will have to make the effort to meet the Americans halfway for the future of their bilateral relations, as well as that of the Asia Pacific. However, the important questions here are: “How far will they go?” and “How fast?”

Washington has similar questions to answer and problems to solve (though on a much smaller scale) in its relations
with its key ally in Asia, Japan. On April 17, Washington hosted the first round of the Japan-US talks on a ministerial level to look at how they could be resolved, which ended with both sides diverging from their initial positions.

During a planned foreign tour at the end of April this year, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will make a brief visit to the United States. President Trump is scheduled to return the gesture at the end of May with a visit to Japan. It is safe to say that one of the key topics in negotiations between the leaders of both countries will be the problem of the negative trade balance for the United States with Japan. Behind closed doors, Abe will probably hear something along the lines of the following from his American counterpart: “We protect you from the Chinese threat, but you outplay us by 70 billion dollars annually. You sell your cars in the US but you do not buy our trucks, beef, pork, or grain. Not good. Not a fair game. As we agreed last fall in New York, we need to get everything sorted by the end of this year.”

Thirdly, let’s look at the Chinese threat. Last year, after many years of what was an almost “glacial” period in relations between China and Japan, a promising trend has emerged which (in theory and if it continues to develop) could eliminate this threat. For the first time since 2011, the Prime Ministers exchanged visits. During his visit to Beijing in late October 2018, the Japanese Prime Minister held a meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. In mid-April 2019, negotiations between delegations from both countries were held in Beijing, headed by Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi. The delegations touched on a wide range of issues, but trade was the area that they focused on. Moreover, the talks were not limited to a bilateral format, but also dealt with the impact of American protectionist measures on world trade in recent years.

An event which would have been unthinkable just a year ago also took place. This was the inclusion of a Japanese warship in a parade in the China’s Qingdao Port, at an event which marked the 70th anniversary of the Chinese Navy, which is celebrated on April 23.

Finally, let’s not forget that we are still talking about positive trends which we are only beginning to see in the strategic configuration of the leading powers in the Asia Pacific. The alarming trends have not gone away. Take yet another ritual offering from Sinzu Abe to Yasukuni Shrine for example, which China sees as nothing more than a “symbol of Japanese militarism.” Another point worth noting is the rhetoric of strengthening the Japan-US alliance, which is being put forward at a time when the “rift between the United States and European nations” is expanding. This article has weighed up the chances the US has of being able to transform its position on the world stage, and the way things look at this point, that transformation is unimaginable.

However, the view this article takes does not see any other way of balancing interests in the China-Japan-US triangle which would help maintain stability in the Asia Pacific.

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