

# FRS – Japan Program

## US-CHINA TENSIONS AND JAPAN'S BALANCING ACT

Hiroyuki Akita



Hiroyuki Akita is a Commentator of the Nikkei Newspaper. He regularly writes commentaries and columns on foreign and international security affairs. He joined Nikkei in 1987 and worked at the Political News Department (1998-2002) where he covered Japanese foreign and security policies, domestic politics. He was Senior & Editorial Staff Writer (2009-17), and he also worked for the “Leader Writing Team” of the Financial Times in London (Oct.-Dec., 2017).

He was Beijing Correspondent (1994-1998) and Washington Chief Correspondent (2002-06). He graduated from Jiyu Gakuen College in 1987 and Boston University (M.A.). From 2006 to 2007, he was an associate of the US-Japan Program at Harvard University, where he researched US-China-Japan relations. In March 2019, he won the Vaughn-Ueda International Journalist Award, a prize for outstanding reporting of international affairs. He is an author of two books in Japanese: “Anryu (Power Game of US-China-Japan)” (2008), “Ranryu (Strategic Competition of US-Japan and China)” (2016).

**Question 1: Japan-China relations do seem to improve, with the perspective of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Japan in 2020. However, this evolution takes place in the context of uncertainties concerning China-US relations. How would you define these contradictions in perspective and the role of the US factor?**

The U.S. and China have entered a long tunnel of conflict, while Japan-China relations are in transition. Japan and the U.S. have rarely moved in such opposite directions in their relations with China. Close attention should be paid to the effects this situation will have.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe talked with Chinese President Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders during his visit to China on Dec. 23-25, 2019. Prime Minister Abe told President Xi that Japan attaches great importance to Xi's planned state visit to Japan and Xi showed China's willingness to upgrade cooperation between the two nations, using the concept of "a new era." This concept, applied to different challenges and situations, is essential for China as it is considered as a major contribution from President Xi Jinping. The “Xi Jinping thought for socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era” has been

included in the Constitution of the Communist Party in 2017.

Some Japanese analysts do consider that China's more positive attitude toward Japan is only transitory since it is a reaction to its conflict with the Trump administration. This analysis, however, is incorrect. The Chinese leadership has sought reconciliation with Japan since the autumn of 2014 partly to prevent a stronger Japan-U.S. alliance.

Although tensions remain between the two countries over the Senkaku Islands, known as the Diaoyu Islands in China, the recent trend toward reconciliation should continue after Xi's visit to Japan whenever it takes place in 2020.

### **Question 2: Is there a consensus in Japan regarding the rapprochement with China?**

Foreign policy officials in the Abe government are not unanimous in expressing satisfaction with this rapprochement. Some fear that frictions could arise between Japan and the U.S. if the respective relations of the two countries with China continue to go in opposite directions.

The current status of the Japan-US-China relationship, where the Japan-China axis is closer than the US-China axis, has rarely arisen since both Japan and the U.S. normalized their relations with China in the 1970s. During the Cold War, the U.S. and China promoted military cooperation against the Soviet Union, their common enemy. As a former high-ranking U.S. government official says, they maintained a relationship that could practically be called a quasi-alliance.

This close relationship between the U.S. and China did not weaken even after the

collapse of the Soviet Union. Their efforts to deal with the North Korea nuclear crisis and their expanding economic relations have worked as new incentives that kept them together. The change in the relationship began in the mid-2010s when China ceased to conceal its ambitions to increase its maritime military presence and attain high-tech supremacy through the China 2025 plan.

In that context, if Japan conforms to the U.S. strategy, Japan's relations with China could become highly tense again. Meanwhile, Japan's relationship with China has been hurt by historical and territorial issues. Since 2012, their dispute over the Senkaku Islands has deteriorated (until, recently, a more positive tonality in declarations) and their relationship has been worse than the U.S.-China relationship. There have been few exceptions to this, including the period following the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989, when a rift between Washington and Beijing worsened. In that situation, Japan was worried that the U.S. and China might secretly strike deals on essential issues, leaving Japan in the dark.

**"Foreign policy officials in the Abe government are not unanimous in expressing satisfaction with this rapprochement. Some fear that frictions could arise between Japan and the U.S. if the respective relations of the two countries with China continue to go in opposite directions."**

### **Question 3: How can Japan deal with the situation where there is an increasing systemic rivalry between the U.S. and China?**

Japan will henceforth be faced with even more difficult challenges. The struggle for

supremacy between the U.S. and China will likely continue for at least the next ten years, and Washington will toughen its policies on China in all respects.

The U.S. will undoubtedly ask Japan and other allies to cooperate in such policies. The country may not only exclude Chinese companies from its critical infrastructures but may ask Japanese high-tech companies and research facilities not to work with their Chinese counterparts.

If Japan conforms to the U.S. strategy, Japan's relations with China will become tense again. On the other hand, if Japan hesitates to go along with the U.S., Japan-U.S. ties will be disrupted. What should Japan do? The thing it must avoid above all else is to try to please both sides. Since the country depends on the U.S.-Japan alliance for its defense, Japan should always side with its ally, the U.S., not with the People's Republic of China. If one looks at history, the lesson of the Tripartite Pact between Japan, Germany, and Italy before World War II shows what can result from choosing the wrong partner.

Since 2008, Japan and China discontinued reciprocal visits by their national leaders, even if some visits took place in a multilateral framework like the G20 when President Xi Jinping visited Japan, or the China-Korea-Japan trilateral dialogue when Prime Minister Abe visited China. However, the Chinese president has not officially visited Japan for more than ten years. The countries are just trying to improve their negative relations to be neither negative nor positive. Japan's alliance with the U.S. is the immovable linchpin of its foreign policy.

The Abe administration said so when it meticulously explained Japan's reconci-

liation with China to Washington behind the scenes. At present, the U.S. seems to understand Japan's position, and there are no open frictions between them. A high-ranking U.S. government official said it was good for Japan and China to ease the mutual tension and that the U.S. was not worried that Japan and China might become closer.

#### **Question 4: What are Japan's margin of manoeuver *vis-à-vis* China?**

The question is how Japan will act from now on. Protest demonstrations in Hong Kong are unlikely to come to an end, and they could rebound even after the end of the coronavirus crisis. In the U.S., criticism against China's crackdown on the Uighurs in the Xinjiang region is also growing, and the lower house of Congress has passed a bill on sanctions against China. If the situation in both regions becomes even more strained than before, Washington may criticize Japan for welcoming Xi for a state visit, even if the visit is postponed due to the sanitary crisis related to the coronavirus epidemics.

However, Japan cannot endure strained relations with China, which has more significant military and economic power. The interdependency between the two economies is very high, and Japan's economy has already felt the burden of the slowdown of China's economic growth and the consequences of the coronavirus epidemics on production and logistic lines. However, there are limits to what Japan can do to improve relations with China. If Japan's relations with the U.S. were compromised while its ties with China improve, Japan would be losing more than it would gain. Japan's diplomatic power will weaken, and China could become bolder about the Senkaku islands and East

China Sea issues. This was the case in 2009 when the policy of Prime Minister Hatoyama government of the former Democratic Party of Japan, which began by "extending a hand" to China, resulted in an increase of tensions in the East China Sea as China tried to "seize the opportunity" of a weaker leadership in Tokyo.

The best course of action for Japan is to pursue the improvement of its relations with China, as long as its relations with the U.S. remain intact. From the standpoint of the U.S., there are red lines that Japan cannot cross like reaching an agreement with China that could weaken the effects of U.S. tariffs in sanctions against China, going against U.S. regulations to control the flow of high technology into China or expanding business with China by taking advantage of the U.S.-China trade war.

None of these actions would benefit Japan either. The U.S. sanctions are aimed at preventing China's infringements of intellectual property rights and pressuring Beijing to change its state capitalist policies, and this is also in the interest of Japan. Japan should first aim at getting results that lead to regional stability. In 2008, Japan and China reached an agreement on the joint development of gas fields to prevent disputes in the East China Sea, but it was never implemented. Realizing the accord is a high priority, as is setting up a hotline between the defense chiefs of the two countries. Both countries could also work with the international community on the control of epidemics and research and development in medical fields.

**March 2020**