

The Roles of the United States in the China–US–Japan Trilateral Relations

Weidong Liu · Bo Wang

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Abstract The trilateral relations among China, US and Japan are one of the most important trilateral relations in world. As the sole world hegemonic power, the United States has been playing as an off-shore balancer, arbitrator and dominator in East Asia to prevent the emergence of a regional challenger against American hegemony in this region. The United States maintains a most advantageous position as the core in the trilateral relations which is termed as “romantic marriage model”. While dramatic changes of the US role in this trilateral structure will not likely change in the near term the US has to play with more caution as the power distribution tilts in favor of China and Japan’s anxiety grows over loss of power.

Keywords US–China–Japan triangular relations · Hegemony

Introduction

Triangular relations have been a classic topic of international relations. Numerous works have been done on the topic. Among them, Michel Tatu’s *The Great Power Triangle: Washington-Moscow-Paris* (1970); Thomas M. Gottlieb’s *Chinese Foreign Policy Factionalism and the Origins of the Strategic Triangle* (1977);

W. Liu (✉)
Institute of American Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Science,
Beijing, People’s Republic of China
e-mail: lwd2222@126.com; liuwd@cass.org.cn

B. Wang
School of International Relations, University of International Business and Economics,
Beijing, People’s Republic of China
e-mail: bowang@uibe.edu.cn

B. Wang
School of Business, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

Gerald Segal's *The Great Power Triangle* (1982), Lowell Dittmer's "The Strategic Triangle: An Elementary Game-Theoretical Analysis" *World Politics* (July 1981) and Kissinger's *Diplomacy* (1994).¹

The most classic triangular relations were the US–China–Soviet relations during the Cold War which dramatically changed the Cold War power distribution: the balance of power tilted in favor of the US and China side. After the Cold War, with China's rise, another set of most important triangular relations emerged: the China–US–Japan triangular relation. The three powers are the most important powers in the world plus complex historical legacies. Though economic interdependence is at a significant high level among them, strategic suspicion has never been dissolved in security arena. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore the dynamics of this triangular relation and find out the prospect of development and changes of this set of relations.

Lowell Dittmer classifies the triangular relations among players as either "positive" or "negative". He suggested four logically possible triangular configurations: (1) the "unit veto", consisting of negative relationships between each player and both others; (2) the "marriage," consisting of a positive relationship between the two spouses each of whom have negative relationships with a third "pariah"; (3) a "romantic triangle," consisting of positive relationships between one "pivot" player and two "wing" players, who in turn have better relations with the pivot than they have with each other; and (4) the "menage a trois", consisting of positive relationships among all three players.² The "romantic triangle" type means the party in the "hub" position establishes a harmonious relationship with both sides in the "wings", meanwhile relations between its two neighbors are not close, perhaps even hostile. This structure looks like a thin isosceles triangle with the hub on the top. Dittmer believes that the hub in the "romantic marriage" is the most advantageous position for any country, because keeping friendly relations with both "wings" will reduce the cost of maintaining the relationships with them. Simultaneously it gains more flexibility for itself because of the confrontation between the other two countries. Therefore, all rational countries will strive for this position, but only the competent one can get it.

China–US–Japan trilateral relations are one of the world's most important trilateral relations. All the three players are global powers in virtually every dimension in terms of national power. They are the top three runners in terms of world economy. They are the first three oil consumers; they possess the largest arsenals in the world and have the most advanced military in the world. If the China–US–Japan strategic triangle isn't the most important trilateral relationship in the world, it will be.³

As the sole dominating power, the United States has been playing different roles in the trilateral relations since the end of World War II: first established a "stable marriage" with Japan in order to contain (the Soviet Union and) China during the Cold War, and then took one part in the "menage a trois" pattern after improving relations with China in 1972. However, with the Soviet Union's collapse, a common rival for the three disappeared; therefore, the glue for harmonious relationship was gone. Meanwhile, Chinese domestic political reform was set back at the end of

¹ Tatu (1970), Gottlieb (1977), Segal (1982), Dittmer (1981) and Kissinger (1994).

² Dittmer (2011), Dittmer (1981).

³ Glosserman (2005).

1980's which turned as a catalyst for the alienation between China and the other two players. In the evolution of the triangular relations, the US explicitly pursued the pivot position in the “romantic marriage” model after the Cold War. The US has been skillfully managing the trilateral relations according to its needs by far. It seems to continue to benefit from the trilateral interactions through delicate adjustment and maintenance of its positions.

The America's Strategic Vision and Plan for East Asia

In 1991 after the Cold War, James Baker, secretary of state under George Bush senior, defined in 1991: a “hub and spoke system” in which the US was the core and other countries were the spokes, and every country had to go through the US to get where it wanted to be.⁴ This can actually be regarded as a combination of many trilateral romantic marriage patterns, while the US is always the only country in the hub position. Since then America gradually determined to build this framework in Asia. During the Clinton administration in 1995, the US “East Asia Security Strategy Report” pointed out that US' interests in Asia are peace and security, access to the region's commercial market, freedom of navigation and prevention of the rise of any hegemonic power or coalition.⁵ This strategy has not significantly been changed till now. The core of it consists of two elements: First, gaining the commercial access to this region is always the main purpose when America began to communicate with the East Asia, which is still the vital interests in East Asia nowadays; Second, the East Asia cannot be controlled by any anti-American or hostile powers. One of the basic principles of US national security is to prevent East Asia from being controlled by one nation since the 19th century. In 2009 Defense Secretary Robert Gates reiterated in Singapore that “For decades after World War II, Asia's security architecture mostly reflected a “hub and spokes” model, with the United States as the “hub” and the “spokes” representing a series of bilateral alliances with other countries that did not necessarily cooperate much with each other.” He stressed that “regional multilateral institutions” did ‘not mean any weakening of our bilateral ties, but rather enhancing security by adding to them (bilateral relations)’.⁶ Such structure can be beneficial to America in two aspects: First, to ensure the balance of the entire system in the way of America's expectation by initiatively adjusting the distance between the hub and different spokes; Second, to dominate the situation of the whole region through the unique advantages of the hub that countries positioned in spokes will never have.

Christopher Ryan put forward the “Offshore Balancing Grand Strategy”, which means that America should manage and control the regional situation by adjusting and keeping the balance among various powers in terms of America's interests, instead of rashly getting involved in the conflict in which America does not have a

⁴ Védrine (2008).

⁵ US Department of Defense, United States Security Strategy for the East Asia –Pacific Region, February 1995.

⁶ Gates (2009).

critical interest. Learning from the British historical model of off shore balancing strategy, Ryan believes this is the best way to guarantee America's interest, and its biggest benefits are to avoid direct conflict, lower costs and reduce risk.⁷ Fareed Zakaria thinks that the US enjoys the sufficient conditions of exerting "Offshore Balance": the rise of other powers is true, but the process of pursuing is still long and slow. Therefore, as a remote outsider, America is often regarded as the most reliable friend by those who worry about the rise of the hegemonic state in their regions. In fact, just as William Wohlforth pointed out, precisely because of the growth of regional power, America is able to strengthen its influence.⁸ The United States has both the hard power that far outweighs all Asian countries and the positive and relatively dependable images that are generally recognized and accepted in international stage.⁹ Its diplomatic tradition of active interference in international affairs provides another necessary condition establish its position as balancer.

In the trilateral relations, China and Japan are the major powers in Asia, therefore the most important players in the arena of America's Asia policy. American scholars believe that China's core interest is to obtain the comprehensive space of strategic development. Beijing seeks to keep the territories integrity, not to be contained, and not to be excluded by the international system. Japan's core interest is to maintain the smooth flow of its international links. Tokyo seeks not to be surpassed, isolated, as well as gagged. America's core interest is to ensure the stability of this region under its lead. The stability surely means benefit-sharing, but Washington wants to retain the leader position, because America and other countries have not yet found another trustworthy stability provider with such desire and such capability.¹⁰ It means that the core interests among the three countries are basically compatible, while there are some interests overlapping areas that may lead to conflict. Therefore, the United States must use its own special status to appropriately manage and control the trilateral relations, not only to ensure neither China nor Japan can challenge US hegemony in East Asia, but also to maintain the basic state of peace among the three countries so that the US can keep profiting from it. For this reason, America hopes to see a China with domestic stability, playing a constructive role in the international community rather than being hostile to the US, a Japan with more confidence and independence, able to play more international role while still under control of America in security area, and a Sino-Japan relations with both sustained friction and relatively stable contact between the two countries, which will invite America's management but without paying excessive costs. Mainly through the delicate adjustment of its China and Japan policy, especially with the policy choice of becoming the hub of the trilateral romantic marriage model, America can meet its requirement on the trilateral relations. Just like

⁷ Ryan (1998).

⁸ Zakaria (1998).

⁹ A research shows that among more than 190 countries in the world, most believe they have special relations America; But in American view, such relations are not as important as what they think. See Robert Cooper, "Both Japan and Europe need America's security umbrella," *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 6 January 2010.

¹⁰ Glosserman (2007).

Kissinger has ever said: “Our relations with potential adversaries should be like this, our freedom of choice to both of them is always more than that between themselves”.¹¹ Since the end of the Cold War, America has been moving in this direction, all specific policies also should be developed with the premise of American freedom of activity.

America’s Role in the Trilateral Relations

America achieves its own strategic purposes primarily through three roles.

“Offshore Balancer” Role

America always maintains a favorable balance of power in East Asia by separately balancing the distance of its bilateral relations with China and Japan, so as to exert the role of offshore balance. America achieves this goal by partially satisfying their respective demands while refraining from granting other demands from them, which makes China and Japan lingering between hope and disappointment, and helps to prevent Sino-Japan relations from being closer than their respective relations with America. As for the value of them from American view, China’s capability and potentiality significantly surpasses Japan’s; but due to the historical grievances and the real disputes between Japan and China which are very difficult to eliminate in the foreseeable future, America can still take advantage of Japan to hedge against China. That is to say, America can turn to China if it needs to solve the global problems, and can ask help from Japan when it has to solve some problems concerning China, so as to maximize its own benefit by overall managing and exploiting the values that China and Japan can provide respectively. In Koizumi’s office term, America had repeatedly demanded Japan to play a more active role in military area, although it cannot be more than clear that this would definitely stimulate aversion and worry among Chinese. But since it not only helps to complement the shortage of America’s power in East Asia, but also worsens Sino-Japan’s relations and furthermore blocks the possibilities of bilateral reconciliation and multilateral cooperation in East Asia, America just stuck to this policy to reinforce its own position as a hub and forced both China and Japan to strengthen their respective relations with it. When Sino-Japan relations improved significantly after the Democratic Party of Japan took power, the Obama administration characterized US–China relations as “the world’s most important bilateral relations” for the first time in history. American politicians even raised G2 concept which made Japan uneasy. Nevertheless, this attempted intimacy did not receive adequate responses from the Chinese side, America swiftly shifted its posture to Japan by firmly standing on Japan’s side to face China in the issue of boat colliding around Diaoyu Islands, and succeeded in preventing Japan from moving forward with centrifugal tendency by both pushing and pulling. Meanwhile in order to reduce China’s concerns about the strengthening of US–Japan alliance, America

¹¹ Kissinger (1994).

declined to sell the most advanced F-22 fighter to Japan, and dispatched high rank officials to Beijing to explain its maneuver in Chinese offshore water. Through the seemingly neutral but actually partial policies on different issues and under different circumstances, America effectively ensures and benefits from the fundamental stability and balance of power in East Asia.

The Arbitrator (Manager) Role

It's obvious that the pattern of East Asia is very special compared with other regions. "The new world order (of the 21st century) is unlike any in history: a single global superpower—the United States and an emerging set of regional superpowers. In South Asia it is India. In Europe it is the emerging European Union. In South America it is Brazil. In West Asia, sadly, it is Iran. This new international order is inherently stable I believe, so long as the global superpower does not overstretch, and has its own domestic economic house in order. It is inherently stable, that is, where there is also a single regional superpower. In East Asia, however, we have two: Japan and China." John Hamre, former US Deputy Secretary of Defense and President of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), wrote in a recent internal memorandum to the Board of Trustees and advisers of CSIS. "I fear Asia is a destined area for conflict if we do not manage the stewardship".¹² The conditions that a steward can work include: America is strong enough and can be accepted concurrently by all parties, and at the same times, there are uncompromising conflicts between the parties. East Asian's pattern exactly matches the conditions. The structural contradictions between China and Japan are more immediate and more urgent than those between China and America, which are the necessary conditions for America to manage Sino-Japan relations. The management is accomplished mainly through arbitrations on conflicts in real life. It is actually a part of the role of Balancer, but stressing more on the role of an impartial third party; and unlike the role of balancer, America may or may not have direct interest involved in it. One typical example of America's role as an arbitrator can be found in the issue of Diaoyu Islands conflict between China and Japan, in which America's viewpoint experiences a significantly change. In 1996, US Ambassador to Japan Mondale had explicitly denied the mandatory of America's military intervention on this conflict under the US–Japan Security Treaty; but in March 2005, the State Department deputy spokesman made it clear that Diaoyu Islands belongs to Japanese government's administrative scope, so the treaty is applicable to the Diaoyu Islands. After the Diaoyu Islands conflict in September 2010, America's declaration is more active. In September 20, 2010, Vice President Joe Biden said: "There is an emerging relationship that we have to get right between the United States and China. Frankly, I don't know how that relationship can be made right other than going through Tokyo."¹³ Secretary Hillary Clinton clearly said: "let me say clearly again that the Senkakus fall within the scope of Article 5 of the 1960 US–Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security. This is part of the larger

¹² Chen (2006).

¹³ Tkacik (2010).

commitment that the United States has made to Japan's security."¹⁴ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Mike Mullen also said: "We are very, very careful observations of the tensions; we are obviously very, very strong support of our allies in the region, Japan."¹⁵ The Japanese were so inspired that they believe the United States is standing with them.¹⁶ But Jeff Bader, US National Security Council for East Asian affairs director, who is considered as a China-understanding expert, gave a speech with gently different tone: "Number one, we do not take a position on the respective territorial claims of China and Japan towards the Senkaku Islands. But number two, the US–Japan Security Treaty covers all areas administered by Japan, and since the reversion of Okinawa to—from the US to Japan in 1972, the Senkaku Islands have been administered by Japan, so that is what that is a reference to. But we have no expectation in any known universe that this would escalate to that kind of a level."¹⁷ Since then, Secretary Hillary said at least twice that the US is willing to hold a tripartite meeting to promote dialogue between China and Japan.¹⁸ An American official said that Secretary Clinton wanted to know exactly during her last visit to Tokyo recently that what the Japanese government is thinking about the nationalization plan of the islands. Clinton made the inquiry apparently due to Washington's concern that the Japanese plan could worsen relations between Japan and China.¹⁹ <http://jen.jiji.com/jc/eng?g=eco&k=2012071000149>. China is discontent with America's remarks on this issue, but since high level officials reiterating America's neutral position on the most sensitive issue of sovereignty and seemingly encouraging settlement of disputes through dialogue, China can also accept it. The US is the only one of unrelated parties that makes a stand in this issue. It satisfied both Japan and China in different extent by the way of not only being partial in favor of Japan but also leaving room for China, and finally succeeded in keeping the issue under control and leading it cool down gradually. America doesn't care who possesses Diaoyu Islands, but it can make both Japan and China who care the fate of the islands pay much attention to its position. This is the role of an arbitrator.

The Leader's Role

As the world's only hegemonic country after the Cold War, the US has always been trying to dominate the critical global and regional agenda. One of the central

¹⁴ "Joint Press Availability with Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara," Honolulu HI 27 October, 2010, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/10/150110.htm>.

¹⁵ Labott (2010).

¹⁶ Japan admires American posture of stressing not to be a bystander, Japanese foreign minister said: "Today, Secretary Clinton repeated that the Senkaku Islands would fall within the scope of the application of Article 5 of the bilateral security treaty. That was very encouraging." See Joint Press Availability with Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara, Honolulu, HI, 27 October, 2010.

¹⁷ The White House Office of the Press Secretary, For Immediate Release, 23 September, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/09/23/press-briefing-press-secretary-robert-gibbs-special-assistant-president>.

¹⁸ Yoko Kubota and Arshad Mohammed, "Clinton urges calm after China-Japan row at summit," *Reuters*, 30 October, 2010.

¹⁹ "Clinton Asked Japan about Plan to Nationalize Senkaku Islands," 9 July, 2012.

objectives of its Asian policy is to rule out the rise of regional and continental hegemony. This objective is based on two considerations: “To prevent the United States from being denied economic, political, and military access to an important part of the globe; to prevent a concentration of resources that could support a global challenge to the United States on the order of that posed by the former Soviet Union.”²⁰ It is obvious that only China and Japan are the most potential to challenge US in East Asia. Therefore, either China or Japan’s move which undermines America’s leading role in Asia, intentionally or unintentionally, will be vigorously curbed so as to maintain the status quo. The 2002 National Security Strategy Report made it clear that the United States will never permit the key areas such as Europe, Northeast Asia, the Middle East and South-West Asia falling into the control of countries that are against America. Even during the war on terror, the United States did not turn its eyes out of East Asia. In the recent program of returning to Asia–Pacific, Obama administration made further effort to strengthen investment to East Asia. In his speech after won the presidential election in November 4, 2008, Obama declared “Our stories are singular, but our destiny is shared, and a new dawn of American leadership is at hand.”²¹ Obama stated clearly during the first US–ASEAN Summit that “The United States intends to play a leadership role in Asia.”²² When meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Noda in April 30, 2012, Obama re-stressed: “It’s the same as what I said in Australia last year, I said in Australia as the United States once again leads the Asia–Pacific region.”²³ Its purpose is to warn the regional powers to make no efforts to exclude US influence in Asia. Japan suffered strong pressure when it proposed the plan of establishing the East Asian Community which excludes the United States; East Asian Summit which originally is only a communication mechanism for heads from²⁴ <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/35204.htm> Then Deputy Secretary Armitage also opposed this suggestion, see Naoko Munakata, “Transforming East Asia: The Evolution of Regional Economic Integration,” *Brookings Institution Press*, 2005, note 29, p. 191. among East Asian countries finally had to accept American membership. It seems that countries in East Asia can hardly do anything smoothly without America’s agreement. By building the new TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership) agreement the US tried to regain its leadership in Asia Pacific economic cooperation which may partly undermine APEC in which China and Japan are increasingly active and dominating in many issues.

²⁰ Khalilzad (2001).

²¹ Obama (2008).

²² Khemara (2012).

²³ Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Noda of Japan at Joint Press Conference, 30 April, 2012, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/04/30/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-noda-japan-joint-press-confer.

²⁴ Powell said: “we are not yet persuaded of the need for these other arrangements, but sovereign nations are free to choose what they do, but don’t choose it in a way that undercuts the very, very fine and strong relations that we have, that the United States has with each and every one of our friends in Asia.” see Roundtable with Japanese Journalists, Secretary Colin L. Powell, Washington, DC, 12 August, 2004.

Case Studies

American roles in the trilateral relations almost can be felt in every aspect. The above elaborated three roles work simultaneously at times. Herein are two typical cases selected to elaborate how America roles work.

First example is America's role in the issue of historical dispute between China and Japan. The conflict on historical understanding composes the main theme of Sino-Japan relations in Koizumi's office term. The continually intensified conflict made the pattern of "cold politics but hot economy" between the two countries gradually turned to "cold politics and cold economy", which may also impact American further interest. There are also historical disputes between America and Japan, Japan's behavior of history denial will touch upon America sooner or later. For this reason, America took a part quietly as the conflict between China and Japan flaring up, the Bush administration tried to tackle it with the principles of "non-interference, taking partial position, keeping the bottom line, promoting the interests".

Firstly, the US generally takes a neutral and non-interfered standpoint. America's official remarks often tried to avoid touching the history issue, or made an implicit and evasive statements when forced to say something.

Secondly, the US tries to control the extent of intensity of the conflict. This was reflected in: (1) openly declared that America hopes the two improve their relations. In November 8, 2005, when Bush made his first comment on the Yasukuni Shrine issue, he said: "it seems like a proper role for me is to remind our friends in the region that it takes work to overcome the past. But overcoming the past is going to be necessary to have a bright future."²⁵ Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice also said: "We encourage the Sino-Japanese friendship."²⁶ But when Japan crossed the redline to deny its history of invasion of neighbors, the US openly criticizes Japan. When Japanese Prime Minister Abe challenged the definition of "aggression" in his reply to parliament questioning, the Washington Post Editorial openly criticizes Abe's historical revisionism and showed moral support for China and Korea which had been invaded by Japan.²⁷ (2) Put pressure on China openly and on Japan privately. America took dual tactics to respectively deal with China and Japan. In the public statement they demanded that China takes the initiative to make more concessions. When talking about the Yasukuni issue in China-US summit, Bush's response was "urged China to promote the future-oriented dialogue with Japan."²⁸ But behind the scenes they secretly put pressure on Japan on high-level bilateral talks. Bush asked Koizumi in Japan-US summit held in late 2005: "China will be East Asia's largest player in the future, how do you think of it?"²⁹ In June 2006

²⁵ Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush (2005).

²⁶ Rice (2006).

²⁷ Washington Post Editorial Board, "Shinzo Abe's inability to face history", *The Washington Post*, April 27, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/shinzo-abe-gets-a-second-chance-to-lead-japan/2012/12/17/c0d5b690-4869-11e2-ad54-580638ede391_story.html.

²⁸ "Zhong Mei feng Hui Tan Ji Jin Guo Shen She, Bush Cheng Dui Zhi You Fu Mian Gan Qing" (Sino-US Summit Talked About Yasukuni, Bush Said He Had Negative Feelings About It) *Xinhua News*, 22 November, 2005.http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2005-11/22/content_3815019.htm.

²⁹ "China's Rise and Japan-US Alliance", (in Japanese) *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 25 November, 2005.

when Koizumi visited America, Bush asked him straightly to the point: “what about the relations with China?”³⁰

Thirdly, America took the opportunity to encourage Japan to play a more active role in Asia. Tension of the Sino-Japan relations in the new century provided America a good opportunity to accelerate its pace of implementing strategic vision towards Japan. The Bush administration not only reinforced the US–Japan alliance once again, but also repeatedly declared that Article Nine of the Japanese Constitution was outdated. The US aimed to allow Japan to play a larger role in the Asia–Pacific region and share more responsibilities in global issues. The tension in Sino-Japan tension over historical issues relations rooted from the historical legacies provides more leverage for America to put pressure on Japan to move towards US expectation. On such issues as US military base adjustment, Extension of Japanese Self Defense Forces Functions, Adding Taiwan Strait situation as a concerned issue to the amended US–Japan Security Treaty, the US had successfully pressured the Koizumi government to withstand domestic pressure and accept America’s arrangement by exploiting the tension in Sino-Japanese relations.

As China’s power is growing at dramatic paces, the fundamental goal for the US is to make sure the balance of power will not tilt in favor of China, particularly when it is certain about whether this power will be a friendly one or hostile one. Therefore, Sino-Japanese disputes on history (Japan’s invasion of its Asian neighbors) have been rather an instrument for the US to manipulate rather than a problem itself. History issue serves for the US to pressure on Japan as well as on China as US can righteously serve as a moral arbitrator because of the US’s role as China’s ally and as the occupier on Japan in WWII.

Another typical example is America’s response to the centrifugal behavior of Hatoyama administration. Hatoyama’s diplomacy with America and China started out at the same time. No evidence showed that he tried to take advantage of one bilateral relation by manipulating the other at the beginning. It was only after his new diplomacy encountered significant resistance from the US side while received positive assessment from Chinese side, did Hatoyama begin to consider balancing the US pressure by relying good relations with China. Diet affairs chief of the ruling Democratic Party of Japan Kenji Yamaoka said: “Japan–US ties are strained. It is a realistic approach to first strengthen Japan–China ties and then resolve the problems with the United States,” He also said, Ichiro Ozawa, the Secretary General of the DPJ, and Chinese President Hu Jintao agreed during a meeting in Beijing that trilateral relations should be equally balanced like an equilateral triangle.³¹ Hatoyama himself also stressed to media on March 19, 2010 that “If Japan–China relations can be improved, and then both the Japan–US and China–US relations will improve.”³² This remark resembled similar logic with the well-known Koizumi’s

³⁰ “China Japan and Korea Relations to Get Worse”, (in Japanese) Jiji Press, 15 August, 2006.

³¹ “Boost China ties: DPJ’s Yamaoka,” *The Japan Times*, 15 December, 2009.

³² “50 Years of Japan-US alliance: an alliance of Life”, *The Nikkei*, 28 March, 2010.

statement.³³ But ironically the leverages and goals in the similar logic are opposite. Naturally this aroused strong resentment from America. *The New York Times* reported that the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, Campbell, complained to the Japanese Diet Defense Secretary in October 2009 that; “Hatoyama told the leaders of Chinese and South Korean leaders that Japan’s overdependence on the US may trigger a crisis in the U.S.-Japan relations.” “What would Japan have felt if American government openly said it value China more than Japan?”³⁴ Campbell showed his concern openly about the visit of a large Japanese delegation to Beijing headed by Ichiro Ozawa in 2009. He questioned the visiting director of policy investigating committee of Japanese People’s New Party: “Does Hatoyama administration want to keep distance with America so as to enhance its relations with China?”³⁵

However, the hint didn’t seem to alert the Japanese government. When Hatoyama and Hu Jintao met in America in September 2009, he proposed the concept of the “East Asian Community”, hoping that Asia establishes a Community like EU to speak out with one voice. He repeated this suggestion afterwards. Japan’s foreign ministry Okada even said that this community does not include America. Hatoyama also raised a concept of “close and equal Japan–US Alliance”, which may be regarded as a challenge to the traditional alliance concept; And a more serious problem is Hatoyama’s ambiguous attitude on the issue of US bases transfer in Okinawa.

Hatoyama administration’s substantial adjustment of Japan’s role in the trilateral relationship had moved beyond what America could tolerate. As a result, America took punitive steps in response to Japan’s “betrayal” behavior. On September 13, 2009, during the time of attending the UN General Assembly, Obama talked with Chinese President Hu Jintao for one and a half hours, but only gave 25 min to Hatoyama for their first meeting after the latter took office, which broke the shortest record of Japan–US Summit talks in history. Subsequently president Obama gave direct telephone calls to leaders of allies, China and India to explain his new strategy in Afghanistan in advance, but just neglected Prime Minister Hatoyama. Then, America intransigently insisted that there was no room for re-negotiating about the Futenma base issue and rejected Japanese request. Defense Secretary Robert Gates even declined to meet his Japanese counterpart when he visited Japan. Under American great pressure, Hatoyama had to resign.

America showed its deliberation on this issue. It didn’t expect Japan to get too close with China, in particular disliked Japanese attempt to exclude American influence in East Asia. So the US government chose Japan as a target to crack down to demonstrate its resolution to maintain its leadership in the region. American found if it kept the external pressure at an appropriate level it could on the one hand would not over-stimulate the Japanese people’s nationalism; on the other hand, it would stir up the sense of urgency among those Japanese who support a strong US–Japan

³³ Kozomi said many times that “The U.S.-Japan relationship, the closer, more intimate it is, it is easier for us to behave and establish better relations with China, with South Korea and other nations in Asia.” See President and Prime Minister of Japan Discuss Strong Relationship, Kyoto State Guest House, Kyoto, Japan, <http://merln.ndu.edu/archivepdf/EAP/WH/20051116-5.pdf>.

³⁴ “US warned Japan about Hatoyama’s foreign policies, NYT,” *The Japan Times Online*, 5 May, 2011.

³⁵ Furumoto (2009).

alliance. The latter would mobilize the former and push the Japanese government from within to strengthen the alliance. Hence at one hand, America made explicit and strong reaction to some top officials who gave inappropriate remarks on US–Japan relations; meanwhile, they showed patience and lenience to the new Japanese government and stressed on the importance of the alliance. Assistant Secretary of State Campbell, publicly stated that Japan is an “equal partner” and that the US has “patience, a commitment to listen, and to work closely” with the new government in Tokyo.³⁶ The US resorted to both pressure and appeasement simultaneously to address on Japanese attempt to adopt the equilateral diplomacy between China and America. One *Foreign Policy* article commented: Hatoyama’s Successors “will well judge, following the Hatoyama fiasco, that the domestic politics of picking fights with America are fraught—and that the powers of the prime minister’s office should therefore be directed toward other issue areas. Such an accomplishment manifestly would be in America’s interest.”³⁷ Exactly as the *Foreign Policy* predicted, when Naoto Kan took office, he fully learned the predecessor’s lesson, never again referred to the new concept of “East Asian Community”, “Close-And-Equal Diplomacy” and “Japan, America and China should compose to an equilateral triangle”. While answering reporters’ questions after he became prime minister, Kan said that “the axis of Japanese diplomacy is the Japan–US relations. We should pay attention to the relations with China on the basis of maintaining a trust relationship with America. This is the right direction of Japan’s future.”³⁸

The Maintenance of the US Position

Based on the such factors as the prolonged, persistent and controversial historical legacy between China and Japan (It’s always difficult for Asian countries to resolve the regional disputes on their own), the power structure (They are equal to each other but both are far inferior to that of the US), the identity (both China and Japan regard the US as friend and both aim to maintain friendly relations with the latter.), the US was entrusted as an actual “strategic balancer” and “arbitrator” in East Asia. Meanwhile, there are no regional security institutions like NATO in Asia, America is still taking the role of committing to regional security and order as it did during the Cold War period.³⁹ Whether the two powers can put aside their differences to follow the path toward a prosperous, stable, and successful East Asia, or whether the region is torn apart by destructive competition and tension due to military build-ups, will partly depend on how America handles the situation.⁴⁰

From a subjective point of view, among the three countries, it is America who is most motivated to maintain the status quo, because it is the biggest beneficiary from current system; China can accept the status quo too, because its economic boom

³⁶ Easley et al. (2009).

³⁷ Twining (2010).

³⁸ Guo (2010).

³⁹ Richardson (2006).

⁴⁰ Lilley (2005).

benefits from the current regional arrangement. Moreover, it cannot narrow the gap with America in terms of national power in the short term; Japan is the most reluctant one to keep the status quo in which the United States maintains a strong power while China grows into a stronger power while leaving Japan inevitably dwindling into a weaker power in the region. The risk is that while Japan is anxious about its loss of comparative power against China, its attempt to change the status quo will challenge US's role as an off-shore balancer. The ongoing China Japan dispute over Diaoyu Island proved that it is a dangerous game for the US to take positions between the two competing regional powers.⁴¹

However, from the strategic perspective, Japan has to accept it due to incapability to change the situation and respective dependence on America and China in the field of security and economy. Therefore, maintaining the status quo is the "least common interest" among the three powers. Considering that Japan unexceptionally tries to involve America in almost all its disputes with China, while China also expects America to maintain its traditional role on Japan as a safety valve to keep Japan from revising its multilateralism, the current roles of America in East Asia will continue to function in the trilateral relations.

By far, America's efforts to keep its own role in East Asia have been modestly successful. In the near future, as America will remain the world's sole superpower, the hope for the complete reconciliation between China and Japan is slim based on their respective growing domestic nationalism. America's roles in the trilateral relations will not see dramatic changes. The key in the future is whether the US can effectively balance its relations with China and Japan with appropriate means. Because first of all, anyone among the three will try its best to raise its position (to struggle for the hub), which means America will often face the challenge of being pushed off the position of hub; Secondly, as the hub America should evade to make any power at the wing position feel that the hub and the other wing are cooperating to weaken itself. If so the third player will likely chose to pay a higher price to end the trilateral romantic marriage pattern. Therefore, in order to maintain the most favorable structure, even players like America has to act very carefully with both skills and power. After all, this will be a delicate game.

Will a "menage a trois" pattern reemerge?

While it is unforeseeable for such a pattern of triangular relations to emerge in the near future, it is a positive way to construct the relations towards that direction as this pattern is more stable and more fitting the trend of international interdependence and win-win approach. The mutually friendly triangular relationship among them will not necessarily lead to the US, who processes the pivot position, to lose its strategic advantage. Instead, the positive relations will reduce the transaction cost for the "leader" to maintain a stable relationship and allow the US more strategic resources to manipulate as a global superpower. However, political trust has to be built to sustain such a relationship. Institutions have to be set up or reformed in order to achieve this goal.

⁴¹ Stearns (2013).

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