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The Transformation of Northeast Asia and the Construction of Future Japan–China Relations

By TAKAHATA Yohei

Many have already seen the map created by Toyama Prefecture, officially named the “Japan Sea Rim and East Asian Countries Map.” Also known as the “Upside-Down Map,” it reverses the traditional North–South depiction in maps, showing Japan at the top and the surrounding countries of Northeast Asia at the bottom from a continental perspective.

To begin with, one remarkable feature is the geography of Japan, with its four main islands, Hokkaido, Honshu, Kyushu, and Shikoku, and 6852 other islands, separated from the continent by the ocean on all sides.

This is easier to understand numerically. For example, the distance from Japan to the nearest point on the Korean Peninsula is about 200 km, and that to the nearest point in China is about over 800 km. In comparison, the United Kingdom, an island country like Japan, is separated from France by the Dover Strait, a distance of 34 km; thus, it is apparent how isolated Japan is from the continent.

In addition, Japan is located at the center of the first island chain at the eastern tip of the Eurasian continent and can also be positioned as the “Eurasian Peninsula.” On the upside-down map mentioned above, Japan also blocks the exit from the continent to the Pacific Ocean; thus, geopolitically it has very “multifaceted” characteristics.

In addition to these characteristics, with the aggravation of conflict between the US and China in all fields, such as politics, economy, and security, Japan has also been impelled to act as a “country between the US and China” since the 2010s. Although the distance from Japan is geographically about 800 km from China and about 11,000 km from the US, from a geopolitical perspective, Japan is an “eternal neighbor state” with both the US and China and undoubtedly an “eternally in-between state” with them.

Incidentally, the term “in-between state” here does not simply refer to its behavior of being geographically located between the two major powers; rather, it seeks to encompass the concept of diplomatic stances beyond geographical categories in pursuing national interests in relation to multiple countries and regions, and also the aspect of being in the middle.

Just last month, in a move that shocked the international community, North Korea launched a military reconnaissance satellite. North Korean leader and Workers’ Party of Korea Chief Kim Jong Un announced at a key party meeting late last year his plan to launch

three reconnaissance satellites by the end of this year. Telephone talks were immediately held between Japan, the US, and South Korea to discuss North Korea, and neighboring South Korea accelerated the introduction of the "Kill Web" concept to reinforce the "Kill Chain" system against North Korea; the situation remains unpredictable. Instabilities such as the situation on the Korean peninsula persist even after the end of the Cold War in Northeast Asia, to which Japan belongs. In particular, the Korean Peninsula has been the site of numerous wars, such as Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasion and the Korean War, and this is likely related to the peninsula being physically adjacent to major powers such as China and Russia.

Since the post-Cold War period, international relations, including in Northeast Asia, have been a progressive entanglement of "conflict, competition, and cooperation," and the diplomatic stance from neighboring countries including Japan needs to be more "united" and "cooperative" rather than "oppositional," uniting our collective wisdom at this point.

Many of you may have heard the term "樽俎折衝" or *sonsoesshou* at scenes set in ancient China and at diplomatic negotiations. This term essentially refers to conducting diplomatic negotiations without the use of force, and Japan too has made efforts to develop Japan-China relations through politicians well versed in *sonsoesshou*.

For example, individuals such as Noboru Takeshita, Ichiro Ozawa, Ryutaro Hashimoto, and Keizo Obuchi, who inherited former Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka's legacy of normalizing Japan-China relations, were the center of power in Japan from the 1970s to the 1990s and built good relations with China.

The Kouchikai (Kishida faction), which was dissolved in response to the so-called LDP slush fund scandal, also had traditional Chinese connections, and former Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida's policy of "light armament and emphasis on the economy" rarely led to major confrontations in Japan's relations with China, mainly because of the presence of Hayato Ikeda, Masayoshi Ohira, Zenko Suzuki, and Kiichi Miyazawa.

The origin of the so-called Shigeru Yoshida Doctrine was the alliance with the US to ensure Japan's protection, markets, and technology and to suppress domestic discussions of rearmament. The plan was also to strengthen relations with Asia, thus maintaining and enhancing the autonomy of Japan.

Thanks to their efforts, since the normalization of Japan-China diplomatic relations in 1972, countless exchanges between the countries have been carried out, beginning with the "Japan-China Joint Declaration" of 1998, the "Japan-China Joint Declaration on the Comprehensive Promotion of a Mutually Beneficial Relationship based on Common Strategic Interests" in 2008, the "40th Anniversary of the Japan-China Peace and Friendship

Treaty" in 2018, the "Japan–China Youth Exchange Promotion Year" in 2019, and the "Japan–China Cultural and Sports Exchange Promotion Year" in 2020, not just in the fields of diplomacy and security, but also in youth exchanges and sports exchanges. What is needed today is to further expand this circle of cooperation.

To this end, I would like to express my own opinion on one possible way to increase the options available to Japanese diplomacy in the future. A hint is in the phrase "Eurasian diplomacy" that Ryutaro Hashimoto, one of the last prime ministers of the Tanaka faction, used in a meeting of the Japan Association of Corporate Executives in 1997. Although not clearly defined, the term expresses Japan's stance of "developing independent diplomacy from a broad perspective" in the future.

Further, it is only by renewing "Eurasian diplomacy" that Japan can expand its circle of friendly countries, whether or not they share values, and demonstrate to the world a diplomatic attitude that shows the pursuit of "global benefits" beyond its own interests.

In 2019, the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Australia assessed the rise of "Japan as a leader of the liberal order in Asia," which shows one aspect of Japan as a country from the world's perspective.

Building a relationship of "trust" with other countries, be they developed or developing, is very difficult for any country or region. However, in this regard, Japan has developed multifaceted diplomatic relations with many countries so far, has earned a high degree of international trust, and possesses a large advantage. As if to confirm this, the 2023 edition of the Henley Passport Index notes that people with Japanese passports can travel to 193 countries without a visa, which is the highest for the sixth consecutive year.

Looking back on Japanese diplomacy, we see that Japan has built diplomatic achievements with various countries and regions based on its ability to make adjustments that do not lead to a deterioration of relations. This is simply reflected in the word "flexible" used by Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa.

In particular, regarding Northeast Asia, at the recent Trilateral Summit between Japan, China, and South Korea under the ASEAN + 3 framework, Prime Minister Kishida spoke of strengthening rapid regional financial cooperation that can be implemented in the event of a disaster, promoting greater participation of women in disaster management by taking into consideration the "Women, Peace and Security (WPS)" perspective, and even emphasizing "detailed cooperation" at the "Future of Asia" dinner last month.

This cooperative stance of Kishida's diplomacy will serve as a message for Japan to develop diplomatic relations while cooperating with all stakeholders in the future, and will likely be an important factor in promoting the "mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests" that was recently reaffirmed between Japan and China.

However, the phrase "mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests" is still merely words. This is also true of the aforementioned "Eurasian diplomacy," but the reaffirmation of the term "mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests" does not imply a shifting of goals for Japan and China. The important thing, beyond mere words, is for Japan and China to cooperate and strengthen concrete efforts toward this goal.

For this, Japan and China must maintain and strengthen their efforts while prioritizing factors where cooperation and sharing are possible.

(This is the English translation of an article written by TAKAHATA Yohei, Executive Director / Distinguished Research Fellow of JFIR / Governor and Executive Secretary of GFJ, which originally appeared on the e-Forum "Giron-Hyakushutsu" of GFJ on June 10, 2024.)