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Improved Cross-Strait Relations Confusing to the Japanese

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Yasuhiro Matsuda, associate professor of the International Institute of Oriental Culture at the University of Tokyo, explains that “Ma's election improved Taiwan's relations with mainland China, eliminating Japan's concern about a cross-strait crisis. However, it has also heightened the prospects for a shift in the regional balance of power towards China.”

The relationship between China and Taiwan has rapidly improved since the new administration of President Ma Ying-jeou was inaugurated in May 2008. In contrast, Ma's relations with Japan have always been fraught with concerns on the part of Japan, including those of Taiwan being swallowed up into China and Ma's latent anti-Japanese sentiment. Meanwhile, suspicions have been lingering in some circles in China and Taiwan that improved cross-strait relations are not welcomed by Japan. What do improved cross-strait relations and the Ma administration's Japan policy mean for Japan? What are Japan's policy options?

First, a recap of strained relations between China and Taiwan during the presidency of Chen Shui-bian from the following three aspects: crisis, power balance, and economic interests. First, Chen's China policy could have destabilized relations with China, even though concern over a possible crisis was not imminent. Secondly, since the power balance in East Asia is contingent on the possibility of cross-strait confrontation, Japan did not have to worry about a sudden change in the status quo. Thirdly, Japan was unable to predict the future of relations between China and Taiwan due to the lack of bilateral official channels, even though their economic ties were rapidly deepening.

Ma's election improved Taiwan's relations with mainland China, eliminating Japan's concern about a cross-strait crisis. However, it has also heightened the prospects for a shift in the regional balance of power towards China. Meanwhile, deepening cross-strait economic ties have made it easier for Japanese companies investing in Taiwan to envision future prospects.

In short, of the three variables mentioned above, Japan's utmost concern is the shift in the regional balance of power in favor of China, caused mainly by the Taiwanese tilt toward China. The United States has a different stance from Japan on this. Since the US is directly responsible for Taiwan's security under the Taiwan Relations Act, it is even more sensitive to the possibility of a cross-strait crisis than Japan. Moreover, the US is dealing with other issues such as the war on terrorism and nuclear developments in Iran and North Korea, which also require Chinese cooperation. Therefore, the US views the Ma administration and improved cross-strait relations as much more positive.

With regards to Ma's policy toward Japan, there is no question that it is of a friendly nature. The Japanese and Taiwanese people share very strong feelings of friendship, and no leader can adopt policies that would challenge such public opinion.



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Furthermore, Ma has singled out Japan as a country with which to form a "special partnership," and organized related events designed to consolidate that partnership. However, his mishandling of a collision between a Taiwanese fishing boat and a Japanese Coast Guard vessel that occurred in the waters off the disputed Senkaku/Tiaoyutai islands, soon after his inauguration, escalated into the highest anti-Japanese sentiments within Taiwan in the past two decades.

How could such conflicting events happen? The answer lies not so much in Ma's personality, but in the fact that the Ma administration and voter base is totally different from Chen's. The core of Ma's government lacks strong Japanese affinity and a part of the party's electorate harbors strong anti-Japanese sentiments. This combination appeals to nationalism by tactically utilizing the mass media to politicize difficult problems, such as the dispute over the islands. Therefore, even though Ma regards Japan as strategically important, occasionally he has to take a hard-line stance regarding Japan.

The Japanese concern over the Ma administration derives from two factors: the regional power shift and the administration's power structure. However, Japan welcomes the easing of tensions across the Taiwan Straits and the deepening of commercial ties with Taiwan. Ma has embraced a pro-Japan policy, but stumbled on the handling of the Senkaku issue. In turn, Japan is still trying to find a satisfactory answer of how to adapt to the rapidly changing East Asian order, in which China and Taiwan are drawing closer amid the rapid rise of China.

What policy options does Japan have? As long as China's rise is peaceful, an outright policy to balance it would be completely outdated. We need to take a more sophisticated approach. Firstly, while welcoming stabilized relations between China and Taiwan, Japan needs to keep reminding China to improve military transparency and not to rely on military might. It has been less than five years since China adopted its de-facto status quo policy, exemplified by the Anti-Secession Law, and it is not yet clear whether this will become Beijing's settled policy.

Secondly, in light of the upgraded cross-strait relations, Japan should seek to upgrade bilateral relations with both China and Taiwan respectively. For example, the signing of an Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), between Beijing and Taipei could be an opportunity for Japan to further strengthen economic ties with both China and Taiwan. Given the increasing direct contact between Chinese and Taiwanese authorities, Japan may consider increasing similar contacts with Taiwan as required. Improved relations between China and Taiwan will in fact offer an opportunity for Japan to improve its own relations with China and Taiwan.

Finally, Japan must avoid the erosion of its own national strength, by maintaining a strong bilateral relationship with the United States. If Japan focuses its efforts upon building its economy via strong relations with other nations, this would help reduce the insecurity felt by many Japanese concerning the power shift towards China or Taiwan's internal political changes.

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