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Trials and Tribulations at Chiyoda: A short overview of Japan's current situation in the International arena

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Resumen

Con el inicio de la era Reiwa en mayo de 2019, la alta complejidad de las relaciones de Japón con sus vecinos se ha convertido en motivo de consideración. La mayoría de estas relaciones son altamente intrincadas, impulsadas por intercambios económicos intensos y pragmáticos en medio de disputas sobre agresiones pasadas y demarcaciones territoriales.

Esto lleva a que un estado que ha hecho de la renuncia a la guerra un pilar de su consenso de posguerra, deba encontrar una manera de fortalecer sus capacidades y cuestionar cómo y por qué usará la fuerza. Japón tiene la necesidad de intensificar sus intercambios con su vecindad y con otras regiones, para apoyar reformas económicas más amplias y soportar los cambios sociales más importantes.

Palabras clave:

Japón, China, Rusia, Corea del Sur, disputa territorial, vínculos económicos

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Abstract

With start of the *Reiwa* era on May 2019, Japan's highly complex relation with its vicinity has come into consideration. Most of these relationships are highly complex, driven by intense and pragmatic economic exchanges amidst disputes regarding past aggressions and territorial demarcations.

This has put a state that has made the renunciation of war a pillar of its post-war consensus, to find a way to strengthen its capabilities and question how and why will use force. It also has in its need to intensify its exchanges with its vicinity and with other regions in order to support broader economic reforms and endure mayor societal changes.

Keywords:

Japan, China, Russia, South Korea, Territorial dispute, Economic links.

Introduction

The past April 1st 2019, Japan announced the name of the new era according to its original calendar, in a matter of a few weeks the "*Heisei*" era will close with the abdication of emperor Akihito and the "*Reiwa*" era shall commence with the ascent of crown prince Naruhito to the throne.

Few countries have had such an eventful last 80 years like Japan, the first ever industrial super-power outside Europe and North America found itself in absolute ruin, disarmed, destitute, and starving and in the frontline drawn between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. While the terms of surrender limited Japan's influence tools to be almost completely tied to those of the United States, and yet it set the base for a speedy economic recovery and a seemingly certain revival of a fully independent foreign policy (Garcia 2015).

However, the almost exclusive dependence on economic tools to exert influence abroad that characterized post-war Japan meant that events like the oil crises, currency crunches and financial crashes can dent Japan's outreach. In addition to these, the post-war consensus has created unique issues in Japan's direct vicinity which severely affect their interactions with the People's Republic of China, the Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation.

These issues will not be solved in the foreseeable future and will be joined by new domestic dynamics that are putting forward a need to make economic institutions more flexible for its inhabitants to join in and where the current administration has started to take an increasingly assertive role regarding the region's economics as well as its security given the increased activity of China and the severely transactional and attitude adopted by the United States. Making Japan an unexpected leader in multilateral forums and questioning its defence role.

This short paper intends to characterize and summarize both the individual mechanics inherited and the new unique domestic and foreign dynamics that conditions how Japan's foreign policy is conducted.

A changing world and being in the middle

One would think that this is the description of late 1950's Germany, while nowhere as extreme as back in the day. This could be a rough description of Japan's current immediate context.

Due to its geographical proximity, strong financial markets and high-end industries, Japan has pursued highly pragmatic economic ties with China and South Korea. Even though in the political and security arenas there are long-running territorial disputes, security concerns and fundamental disagreements regarding how some WWII events were handled. On the other hand, both the sur-

render and the occupation by the United States have permanently tied Japan's foreign engagements in to those of Washington and were both the US's capital and expertise that laid the foundation to Japan's recovery and long running economic boom. However, this made Japanese currency prone to be speculated with, thus vulnerable to shocks and other issues and in several occasions the US has not hesitated to impose its interests upon those of Japan.

How this dichotomy is dealt with by Tokyo is often subject of debate. *Koga* (2018) argues that Japan has "hedged" its situation vis-à-vis major competing actors in the region, which is pursuing insurance against opportunism in view of both foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences, in this particular case Japan has loosened restrictions regarding the use of the Self-defence forces, lifted barriers regarding the sale of military hardware and updated its equipment in order to deal with increased Chinese naval activity and an increasingly ambivalent US, which suggest willingness to use force to exert its interests in Asia but not a complete commitment to its alliances.

This dichotomy is also seen in the economic arena, ever since the 2016 election the US has either hindered the work of multilateral organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO); by blocking the nominations of the judges of its arbitration court and withdrawing from the Transpacific Partnership (TPP) agreement, or taking on tougher stances regarding the expenditures of allied states and imposed barriers on trade, sustained on questionable national security grounds, should these states have a trade-surplus with them.

Plus, since the start of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's tenure the priority of Japan's foreign policy has been to help whenever possible to spur the economy back into sustained growth. While current figures are not as spectacular as those of the 1960's and 1970's they tend to lend some credence to "Abenomics" as *Zhou* (2018) cites, by combining monetary easing, fiscal stimulus and structural reforms. Abe's administration achieved sustained growth rates of 0.5%-1.5%; 1% growth in real estate prices as of 2017; and 8.6% and 7.6% growth for imports and exports respectively compared to 2016 among others. Among the later ones has been Japan's intensification of trading relationships via the signature of EPA agreements and joining up major competing trading blocs like the Comprehensive and Progressive Transpacific Partnership or CPTPP (the reformed TPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership or RCEP (the Chinese led counterpart of the earlier one) putting it as one of the only contact point of between the largest multilateral trade agreements in the planet.



The inheritance of the era

As it was previously mentioned in this paper there are certain relations apart of that with the United States, which are worth mentioning given the salience of some of the issues they contain. Most of them are longstanding and hardly ever bring significant disruption of the daily order of business in the area, but there's been an increase both in the number of times they flare-up and in their resonance. These are with People's Republic of China, the Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation.

Russia

Japan was officially considered as superpower in equal right as of its victory in the war against the Russian Empire in 1904; which saw some of the bloodiest and largest fighting in both sea and land until WWI. Later Japanese forces made the bulk of the "Siberian Expedition" an ill-fated attempt by the allies to prop-up the White Russians against the communists. This meant that within the internal turmoil of the early decades of the Soviet Union and the simultaneous radicalization of Japanese leadership, links were at best incidental. With the exception of the 1939 Khalkin Gol/Nomonhan incidents there was no interaction of note until the Soviet invasion of Manchuria in the late days of WWII.

One of the consequences of this very short engagement was the partial occupation of the Kuril Islands by the Soviets. This issue has been the main reason, by which Japan and Russia have not moved beyond signing an armistice. As of late there has been a step up of efforts to resolve the matter. However, both sides are adamant: Japan considers the handover of the islands a prerequisite to any deal, while Russia insists that territorial matters are secondary to the normalization of ties and the establishment the how everyday business regarding the islands will be conducted.

Rozman (2017) detects that there three major perceptions regarding this issue; first the possibility of a breakthrough, second a continued degradation of ties as a by-product of US-Russia tensions and some sort of stand-by until relations with China and the US finally set a tone. It must be noted from now on that, from now on all interactions mentioned will be foreshadowed by issues of territoriality and perceptions of past events. Regardless of any other levels of complexity may exist.

South Korea

This relationship is often the most heard of given the most common issue to flare-up. The "comfort women" is the most commonly cited example of war crimes committed by Japanese imperial forces in occupied territories. These women, most of them of young age, were forced into sexual servitude and similar practices to eke out a living at Imperial Japanese Army sponsored brothels. The fierce activism of these women has taken an important role in South-Korean discourse towards Japan, even if they share security concerns towards North Korea, a pledge to be defended by the US and highly sophisticated economies.

Even so there's been a constant functionality to it. This uses the multilateral forums as a work-around to opposing national discourses, since disputes not only include how WWII events were dealt with by each society but include a territorial issue over the control of Liancourt Rocks (Dokdo in South Korea and Takeshima in Japan) which have rich fishing areas and probably gas deposits. Jackson (2018) cites several examples but in particular the Trilateral Cooperation Council which includes China, the members of the council are still limited by the issues described before since they tend to conclude in two

vs one situation. However, the council has been critical to facilitate investment flows between the three countries with the North-East Asia investment treaty; although the clout of the Chinese economy may have allowed very questionable concessions, The author acknowledges that on a bilateral basis such a treaty would not have been possible since it was concluded at a time where Japan-South Korea relations were at its lowest. Since, Japan had publicly re-asserted its claim upon the territory afore mentioned. Right after South Korea had actively participated in the aid and relief efforts from the 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster.



China

China is probably the most complex of the following relationships, its territorial component the Senkaku/Diaoyou is strong and intractable. The grievances regarding WWII events are even older than those of others and include infamous episodes like the "Nanjing Massacre" and testing of chemical weapons on civilians and other non-combatants, and still hold a powerful sway on public opinion. Plus, it is up to discussion how do they intend exert power Chinese leadership is dead-set on positioning China as a power in equal right to others. This presents an unique set of challenges in which the dense and highly functional economic relationship between the two specially since there's been an increasingly assertive attitude from the People's Liberation Army in the form of build-ups and incidents giving Japan incentives to both pursue its own build-up and preserving critical communication channels (Miyamoto 2014).

As of now both nations are highly active actor in the multilateral arena, in particular neither of them seems keen on the quasi-mercantilist bilateral approach to trade now spoused by the US. And yet, it seems that there's some competition between for investment opportunities outside the region using their sheer financial strength.

Most recent economic engagements started under Prime Minister Taro Aso in 2007 under the premise of establishing a "mutually beneficial relation-

ship founded on common strategic interests” although it keeps insisting in setting up alternative forums that dilute China’s new found clout (2009).

Conclusion

This new era will inherit several long-running relationships with several degrees of complexity given their new-found economic links fostered in either a bilateral fashion or through multilateral forums that buffer out intractable national narratives. While their common saliences regarding historical perceptions and territoriality will remain unresolved for a long time, new highly assertive actions from China and Russia will push Japan to put its physical security as paramount in its relationship with this two states while constantly use “hedging” defined as “insurance against opportunism” in its antagonistic but increasingly functional and dense links with China and South Korea. Since, their deepening appears to support a longer-term economic reform that despite of yielding moderate positive results, their sustainability in time is still fragile and easy to question.

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