

Strategic Relationship Between the United States and Asia: Perspective from Japan

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There is no doubt that the relationship between the United States and China is a competitive one. Some may say that it is a rivalry or even hostility, since the United States is afraid that China could take over US hegemony. But we need to ask questions whether such characterization is appropriate to understand the strategic relationship between these two countries. In understanding this issue, we need to re-examine the nature of US-China rivalry and see if it is about hegemonic power struggle or not. This is substantially important issue for both Japan and France as allies of the United States and at the same time economically dependent on China.

Re-examination of Hegemonic Struggle Hypothesis

The concept of hegemony or puissance is different from the concept of power. A state with high military and economic resources and capabilities for operationalizing them is a power, but hegemony requires a power to induce other country to do something without sanctioning military or economic power (one may call it “soft power”).

The current situation in the United States, with a president who claims “America First” policy, rejects the notion of international cooperation and neglect its allied states except Israel, does not fit to the definition of hegemon. Although NATO and Japan-US alliance are still functioning, the current Administration is not using them effectively. In this regard, it is difficult to regard United States as hegemonic state despite its military and economic power.

In the same token, it is difficult to define China as hegemonic state. Except North Korea, China does not have formal ally, and even states that are in quasi-alliance with China are limited to Pakistan, Cambodia and Laos. It is extending its friendly relationship with states under Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but they are welcoming Chinese investment and economic relationship, not military presence or political influence.

It is still arguable that China has hegemonic ambition. On the one hand, China is aggressively investing in developing countries by financing in critical infrastructure projects through BRI lending. If those states are unable to pay their debts, China would gain the control over those

properties such as in the case of Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka. China's military build-up is also considered to be an expression of hegemonic ambition. Aircraft carriers, hypersonic gliding missiles and stealth fighter jets represent Chinese ambition to improve its military capability and to operate globally. The activities in South China Sea are also posing threat to neighboring states. So, there is no doubt that China is becoming a superpower in global economy and regional military architecture.

However, on the other hand, Chinese "soft power" strategy is not bearing fruits, at least for now. Its emergency supply of masks and other medical equipment to fight against COVID-19 was cautiously appreciated, so that China fabricated online movies and tweets in which those European states show appreciation to China. Chinese economic activities are facing difficult challenges from local resistance and often resulted in establishing anti-China governments. Chinese penetration in African states as "sharp power" confronts with an image that China as imperial power. It is yet too early to say that China has established itself as hegemonic power.

Power Competition between US and China

Neither US nor China can qualify as hegemon in these days, so that we shall see the strategic competition between these two as power competition instead of "New Cold War". There are some traditional fronts of this strategic competition. The first is South China Sea. The United States strongly concerns the Chinese ambition to extend its territory by reclamation of islands. China has made its strategy of A2/AD (Anti-Access/Area Denial) public and building up its military forces to protect what it calls "sovereign territory in the sea". Most of parts of South China Sea is international public water or high sea, so China is not allowed to claim its sovereignty in South China Sea but A2/AD strategy seems to declare that it will treat this area as sovereign territory. This, of course, extends to the issue of territorial conflict around Senkaku/Diaoyu islands with Japan.

However, if we look around the world, the only territorial, strategic competition takes place in South and East China Sea. Although China is extending its influence in Africa or Central Asia, these are places where the United States have lower priorities. China on the other hand is not putting its hands on strategic areas such as Middle East. The presence of in the Middle East region is not strong despite there is a sharp confrontation between United States and Iran. Although China maintains certain economic relationship, it does not challenge the US unilateral sanctions on Iran. In this regard, Chinese actions can be characterized as defensive and regional rather than aggressive and global.

On the other hand, the United States is focusing on the Chinese capabilities on technological development. The development of cyber-attack capabilities is considered to be the largest threat since there are number of cyber espionage and sabotage incidents that caused damages on US industry. Although there is no cyber-attack which goes beyond the threshold of "act of war", the constant cyber incidents from China has been a huge headache for the United States. At the same time, rapid development of Chinese space capabilities – launching

space laboratories, sending a rover to the other side of the Moon, and destroying its own satellite in 2007 – has been a big concern since the United States heavily relies on its military capability on space. The US cannot move its troops or shoot missile without GPS signals or flying and attacking by drones without satellite communications. Chinese counterspace capabilities pose a huge threat to the US military capabilities. Furthermore, the emerging technologies such as 5G communication technology is now becoming a hot zone of US-China rivalry not only because it is closely related to military technologies, but also because these technologies have a lot of implications on the future of economic activities in Society 5.0.

The US-China rivalry is, therefore, regional in a traditional sense, but if one looks at in detail, it is a competition of technological supremacy which may have both military and economic implications.

Dilemma in 5G technology

Technologically speaking, fifth generation (5G) mobile communication technology is not something new. Using high frequency for wider broadband with larger number of connections is a technology well-known for meeting the increasing demand for mobile communications. Many companies such as Nokia of Finland, Ericsson of Sweden, Fujitsu and NEC of Japan are capable of producing and providing hardware and software for 5G infrastructure. However, Chinese companies such as Huawei and ZTE provides most competitive products in the market. Chinese companies have already established significant proportion of global market in 4G hardware, and it is likely that their market share will be increased in 5G market.

Although 5G technology is something new, it became a hot zone of US-China rivalry because the concern on the control of data going through mobile communications network. Since 5G is expected to be the central technology for the next generation of social system – Society 5.0 where automated driving and remotely controlled robots and drones provide services – society will depend heavily on 5G network. In other words, most of socio-economic activities will be taken place within the 5G network, so that if China can control the network and flow of data, it can easily launch cyber-attack by confusing traffic signals or by penetrating power grid to switch off the electricity. Furthermore, China has a legislation to force companies to submit any data in their possession to the government. If US or its allies use Chinese vendors, this would mean that these companies are obliged to provide all data trafficked in those states. In other words, every economic, industrial or even military and strategic activities can be legally seen and controlled by Chinese government. Even if military or critical infrastructure system are isolated from commercial 5G network, increasing dependence on 5G network in ordinary socio-economic life would provide huge leverage for China. Thus, the US is strongly demanding its allies not to use Chinese vendors for 5G network installation.

However, there is other side of the story. 5G requires large amount of investment because of its technical nature. Since it is using higher frequency, the radio wave travels like light rather than sound. The 4G frequency wave can avoid barriers and go around it, but 5G wave stops if

there is building or car. Thus, in order to have ubiquitous access, there must be much higher number of antennas in a city. This requires large amount of investment to establish universal service. If a state chooses Nokia or Fujitsu antenna, it will cost far more than Huawei products. Industrialized states such as Britain, Germany, France or Japan are in competition of setting up nationwide 5G networks in order to be competitive for developing service providers using 5G network in the coming Society 5.0 economy. So, everyone is trying to set up 5G network as soon as possible. If they choose expensive hardware, it will slow down the process of establishing the network. Therefore, there is not much choice but to use most affordable and competitive products from Chinese vendors.

So, every state in US alliance will face a serious dilemma. On the one hand, there are security concerns about using Chinese vendors, but on the other hand, it would be difficult to stay competitive in Society 5.0 world without using Chinese vendors. The United States and Australia have decided not to use Chinese vendors, and Japan followed in a similar manner, but most of European states have decided to use Chinese vendors for “non-core” networks, which means that using only for commercial and non-sensitive networks.

It is worth noting that avoiding Chinese vendors does not provide risk-free environment. Many Western vendors such as Nokia, Ericsson, Fujitsu or NEC are using Chinese parts and components. If the vendors of these parts and components planted some device or software codes to transfer data to China, it is hard to detect. Also, it is important to keep in mind that there are a lot of software which are provided by Chinese companies. For example, Tiktok, one of the most popular video sharing applications especially among young people, is provided by Chinese companies. Alibaba, Tencent, Beidou and DiDi are heavily penetrating Western market. Even if a state avoids Chinese hardware, these applications can also take data to China which may be used for some strategic purposes. In other words, excluding Huawei is only a partial solution at best, and there are many other ways that we depend on Chinese products.

US-Japan-China Relationship

Under such strategic rivalry, particularly on emerging dual-use technologies, Japan's position is a confusing one. On the one hand, even during the Trump Administration, Japan tried to maintain its security alliance with United States by providing a variety of “gifts” to President Trump such as multi-million dollar investment in the US manufacturing sectors and Japan-US free trade agreement to allow US agricultural goods to be exported to Japan. Abe Administration did a detailed research on the personal network and focused on various insiders including President Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner. This effort by Prime Minister Abe is heavily criticized within Japan, but his objective is to provide incentives for President Trump to be interested in defending Japan. Since Japanese Constitution does not allow to have aggressive military capabilities, the alliance with US would be the only way to deter China and nuclear-capable North Korea.

Although the United States treated its European allies as if they are adversaries, Trump Administration with strong antagonistic attitude towards China made it much easier to maintain the strategic relationship with Japan. President Trump kept claiming that he wants Japan to pay more for stationing US troops, but unlike his attitude towards South Korea, the demand is not too aggressive. One of the reasons is that Japan already bears 86.4% of the cost of US troops whereas South Korea does roughly 50%. But on the other, the US needs bases in Japan in order to meet the challenges from China. In this regard, the strategic relationship between Japan and US remains solid unlike many other US alliance relationships.

Meanwhile, China is the largest trading partner for Japan and the relationship is dramatically improving. There is a consistent pattern of Chinese behavior that when US-China relationship is not good, Japan-China relationship gets better. From Chinese point of view, Japan is a counterweight to the balance with its relationship with the United States, and it wants to strengthen the relationship with Japan for creating distance between Japan and US. President Xi Jinping is desperately demanding to meet the new Emperor after the State Visit by President Trump and show that China is the number two country for Japan. Unfortunately for China, the State Visit by President Xi was postponed by COVID-19, but he still maintains the schedule to visit Japan in Autumn.

However, such rapprochement is not reflected on the security issue between Japan and China, particularly with regard to the territorial dispute on the islands on East China Sea. Japan has turned its traditional military posture by shifting its troops to South Western fronts with amphibious forces in order to meet these challenges. The military build-up by China has been a serious threat to Japan, particularly the newly developed Hypersonic Gliding Vehicles (HGV) which may neutralize Japanese missile defense systems. Japan has decided to introduce Aegis Ashore, ground-based surface-to-air missile as additional layer for its missile defense system, but this investment may end up in vain because missile defense can only be effective if the incoming missile is a ballistic one. HGV would make it extremely difficult to intercept by mid-course missile defense layers such as Aegis systems.

Furthermore, the National Defense Program Guidelines of December 2018, mid-term defense strategy of Japan, focuses on so-called “gray zone” incidents, such as aggressive action around Senkaku/Daioyu islands by non-military vessels. Also, the Guidelines placed significant emphasis on the necessity to develop capabilities in countermeasures for cyber, space and electromagnetic attacks. It is clear that Japan concerns these non-traditional confrontations with China.

In such trilateral context, Japan is paying a very close attention to Chinese interests in Japan’s high-tech capabilities and exploiting Japan’s industrial weakness. Abe Administration has ordered to set up a new economic division in National Security Secretariat (NSS), the administrative machine to support national security strategy, which focuses on the economic activities for the sake of national security. Its mandate is to establish a new strategy for preventing adversaries to gain access to Japanese technology through mergers and

acquisitions, overseas students learning critical technologies in research institutions, or through exports. Associated with the establishment of economic division in NSS, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) set up a new division to investigate technology to find out vulnerabilities of Japanese strategic industry such as robots, information technologies, synthetic biology or materials like carbon fiber. METI will investigate global supply chain of critical industries for Japanese competitiveness and dual-use technologies including emerging technologies. If these industries depend heavily on foreign supplies of material or components, METI will encourage Japanese industry to provide alternative source in order to reduce dependency on foreign supplies. Also, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) has established new economic security office to support the activities of NSS and METI in international fronts. MoFA is responsible for coordinating with its allies, especially with United States to conduct strategic planning for protecting intellectual properties of both states and collaborate with other like-minded countries to establish international rules and code of conduct.

In this way, Japan is playing a role as the ally of United States and working collectively to counter the Chinese capabilities in strategic technologies including emerging technologies. Japan has committed not to procure Huawei products for government-related 5G networks and encouraged private industry to follow the government standards. Meanwhile, Japanese government decided to procure from Fujitsu and NEC for 5G networks. This demonstrates that Japan is using US pressure to build up its autonomous capabilities and reduce vulnerabilities in key technological domains.

Conclusion: What Japan and France can do together

France and Japan are in a similar position. We are facing the same troubling alliance relationship with the United States and growing influence of China. President Macron and Prime Minister Abe are both trying to find out the middle ground in US-China rivalry. Also, France and Japan are trying to build up autonomous capabilities in strategic technologies. In these circumstances, it is wise to focus on the national autonomous capabilities for reducing dependency on the military alliance with United States and economic dependency on China. Maintaining economic competitiveness by investing in domestic technology and nurturing domestic industry in times like this is the right strategy.

France and Japan are also playing key roles for maintaining rule-based international order. Neither United States nor China are interested in international rules that restrict and regulate their powers. However, if there is no effective international rules and standards, the new technologies such as 5G or other emerging technologies may be used for unregulated confrontation between superpowers. Although it is certain that both US and China are not interested in participating in those international rules, it is extremely important to set up those rules to make sure that there is some standards of operation and a line to draw between right and wrong. These standards are necessary to put pressure on two superpowers to behave according to them, and to make sure to reduce uncertainty.

The Japan-EU Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), together with Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) is utmost important. The framework of SPA is general and comprehensive, so that it can be used in various arena of international rule making. It includes cooperation in cyber issues, space technology, non-proliferation of WMD and export control, and science, technology and innovation. These are the elements that Japan and EU can work together to build our autonomous capabilities and collaborate to set up international rules. In this leaderless, G-Zero time, the cooperation between Japan and France/EU would have much higher significance to maintain the stability and certainty in the world.