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Questions over China's intentions

By SHIRAISHI Takashi

Negotiations in the U.N. Security Council over North Korea's ballistic missile launches have been settled, after many twists and turns, with the adoption of a resolution that omits reference to Chapter 7 of the U.N. Charter that obliges member states to adopt sanctions. The resolution, by and large, was to be expected, given that China, anxious about the possible collapse of North Korea, was opposed to any Chapter 7-based resolution.

What Pyongyang aimed at in the missile launches this time was, in my view, to have its negotiations with Washington and Tokyo reactivated. The missile tests, however, did not achieve the North Korean objective of making the United States and Japan adopt an engagement policy toward Pyongyang.

The result is that North Korea's situation has remained little changed despite its missile launches. That is, what can be characterized as a pattern of limited engagement with North Korea--Japan and the United States attempt to contain North Korea, while China and South Korea favor engagement--will continue. However, it has also become clear that the United States and Japan, which disagree with Beijing's appeasement policy toward Pyongyang, now hold China responsible for resolving the North Korean problem.

China's 'great restoration'

Not that I want to focus here on the North Korean problem. On this occasion I would like to note that China has definitely been playing an important role with regard to the North Korean problem as well as in a number of other security issues in the East Asian region. Accordingly, we need to consider how best to engage China in building a new regional order in East Asia, while restraining China from acting unilaterally.

China, in the national strategy it adopted in 2002, called for "a great restoration of the Chinese nation," and set the goal of quadrupling its gross domestic product to 4.4 trillion dollars in 2020 compared with 2000. If this goal is achieved, the Chinese economy will surpass Japan's in size around 2020 at the current exchange rate. In terms of purchasing parity, it already surpassed Japan's in 1994 and has reportedly grown to half the size of the U.S. economy since 2002. This economic rise of China will certainly bring about major changes to the balance of power both

globally and regionally.

How will things likely evolve from now on? This problem is usually posed as a question--What kind of regional order in East Asia will China want to create with the increase in its national power?

Defensive or hegemonic?

Two contrasting views can be offered, depending on whether one sees China's "intention" as defensive or hegemonic.

Historically speaking, China has been defensive toward its neighbors, making efforts to create buffer zones around the country to defend itself from external influence. One response to the question posed, therefore, is that China will endeavor to create a peaceful, prosperous and stable environment for the sake of its modernization goals. If one opts for the hegemonic interpretation, however, the answer could be that China will eventually seek to replace the United States as the dominant regional power and build a new Sinocentric order in East Asia.

But it is wrong to assume that there is something called "China's intention" and that we can correctly identify what it is. The Chinese government under President Hu Jintao, for instance, has declared China's ascent on the world stage as peaceful, stressing the significance of China's role as a "responsible power."

On the other hand, however, the same government has not ruled out the possibility of China resorting to military action to prevent Taiwan from becoming independent. In addition, China has been acting unilaterally in exploiting seabed resources in the East China Sea despite repeated protests from Japan.

How can one say anything meaningful about China's intention based on its conflicting statements and actions? State actions are outcomes of policy decisions, and in places such as China where we do not often understand how policies are decided, "intentions" that supposedly inform us China's actions are open to individual interpretation. The question we should ask, instead, is whether China will act more multilaterally or unilaterally.

Shift to deterrents

Or to put it a different way, as a policy matter, the question is: What should be done to prod China to act more multilaterally with other countries and discourage China from acting unilaterally by raising the cost of unilateral action?

Japan has adopted an engagement and deterrent strategy. On the one hand, it has been engaging

China by promoting regional cooperation and setting common norms of conduct through processes such as the ASEAN plus Three--the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and Japan, China and South Korea--and East Asia Summit in the name of East Asia community-building.

On the other hand, Japan has also been relying on the Japan-U.S. alliance to deter China. Recent talks about strengthening the mutuality of the Japan-U.S. security treaty and establishing a new strategic dialogue between Japan, the United States, Australia and India are meant to put emphasis on deterrence.

This is fine. But given that China is bound to have increasing influence in East Asia, it is important for Japan to consider more creative ways of engaging China on the basis of its alliance with the United States.

What I mean by this is similar to a doctrine now current in the United States that calls for China to act as a stakeholder in the international community. The crux of this view is that China, in addition to pursuing its own interests, should also play its role in securing a global order, while joining in efforts by other members of the international community to address global problems.

One specific example would be to urge China to use its influence to address problems such as North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. In respect of nations such as Iran, Sudan, Nigeria and Venezuela that have been "problematic" in recent years, China should actively work toward international cooperation, instead of merely considering oil interests in these countries.

This way of thinking can be applied to how Japan and the United State should engage China in East Asia. China, for its part, stresses its peaceful ascent. To ensure that it follows up on its words, Japan should encourage China to behave in a responsible manner in building an East Asian regional order.

Japan should prod China to work together on the basis of the shared interests of the two countries and on mapping out common norms and rules. Japan should therefore throw support behind domestic forces in China working in favor of a peaceful ascent.

Trilateral meeting

How can all this be put into practice? My view is that a high-level trilateral meeting should be institutionalized between Japan, the United States and China. The three countries should exchange views candidly about their respective strategies regarding key issues in the East Asian region. Included in the agenda should be ways of boosting cooperation on energy problems, confidence-building measures and preventive diplomacy in the region, as well as common rules of conduct in the East China Sea.

In Japan, with the presidential election of the Liberal Democratic Party and subsequent formation of a new administration scheduled for September, Japan's Asia policy has become a major issue. Discussions on Asia policy, however, have focused too narrowly on the visits by the prime minister to Yasukuni Shrine, though the issue is more tactical than strategic to the future of East Asia.

Japan has benefited from the US-led regional order which has evolved in East Asia in the postwar era. But economic development in many East Asian countries and China's ascent as an economic powerhouse will transform this regional order.

To ensure the creation of a new order in the region, Japan should join hands not just with the United States, but with China and other East Asian nations. The key to addressing this challenge lies in achieving the proper mix of Japan's strategy of engagement and deterrence toward China.

(This is the text of an article by Prof. SHIRAISHI Takashi, Vice President of the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies and Member of the Council on East Asian Community, which originally appeared in the "Insights into the World" column of the "Daily Yomiuri" on July 30, 2006)