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Second Thoughts on Future Order in East Asia

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Over the past several weeks, the world witnessed three developments of great importance in East Asia--Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Beijing and Seoul to resume summit meetings with Chinese and South Korean leaders, North Korea's claimed nuclear test and a military coup d'etat in Thailand.

The resumption of summit meetings with China and South Korea is indeed good news. Pyongyang's proclaimed nuclear test and the Thai coup, however, compel us to have second thoughts on our assumptions about the future regional order in East Asia. What issues have stemmed from those latest events?

First, let us look at Abe's summit meetings with the Chinese and South Korean leaders in their respective capitals on Oct. 8 and 9. The meetings were aimed at breaking several years of political impasse with China and South Korea and seizing the opportunity for rebuilding relations with the two neighboring countries. Abe was expected to take such initiatives, given that diplomacy toward Asia continued to be a major political point of contention in Japan, and the new prime minister had expressed his willingness to address the issue in his inaugural policy speech and in answers to lawmakers' questions at the Diet.

In an apparently corresponding move, China began laying the groundwork for a new political relationship with Japan. Chinese President Hu Jintao has created a political environment in which he can exert his leadership in dealing with Japan by controlling China's Communist Party and government. Proof of this was the recent dismissal of Chen Liangyu, secretary of the Shanghai Municipal Committee of the Communist Party, who is the right-hand man of former Chinese President Jiang Zemin.

However, it is the risk-taking leadership of Abe and Hu that ultimately led to the summit talks. As a result, the two countries will now find it easier to hold working-level consultations on North Korea and bilateral issues, such as the development of East China Sea natural gas fields, among others. Such high-level exchanges will facilitate the rebuilding of a bilateral relationship of mutual trust.

Second, North Korea announced that it exploded a nuclear device on Oct. 9, a development that poses a grave threat to Japan. Up until now, the international community has adopted a limited engagement approach to North Korea--Japan and the United States seek to contain North Korea, while China and South Korea engage with Pyongyang. Under this policy framework, Tokyo and Washington do not agree with Beijing's engagement policy toward Pyongyang, but, if China adheres to its policy, Japan and the United States hold China responsible for resolving the North Korean problem. This is about the extent of the "limited engagement" approach.

It has become evident in the wake of North Korea's ballistic missile test-launches and this month's nuclear test that in reality, Beijing does not hold much sway over Pyongyang. In other words, the prerequisite for limited engagement now has been lost. Nor does China want North Korea to go nuclear and undermine the already troubled nonproliferation regime. This time, despite its opposition to international sanctions that might prompt Pyongyang to resort to reckless action, China refrained from vetoing a U.N. Security Council resolution to impose sanctions on North Korea under Chapter 7 of the U.N. Charter.

International policy toward North Korea has thus shifted from limited engagement to limited containment. Nonetheless, the adjective "limited" remains because there is no agreement between the two groups--Tokyo and Washington on the one hand, and Beijing and Seoul (as well as Moscow) on the other--on what they hope to achieve with the new approach to Pyongyang.

While Japan and the United States aim to have North Korea's nuclear and missile programs scrapped, China and South Korea do not want to see a catastrophe befall the country. If this happens, Seoul would pay an exorbitant price for the unification of the two Koreas. For China, a massive flow of North Korean refugees into northeastern China could cause serious problems, but, more important, the political status of a unified Korea in the future would directly affect its own security. It should be clear what issue the North Korean problem would really bring forth beyond the U.N. Security Council's unanimous resolution to invoke sanctions on North Korea and limited containment. In the not-so-distant future, the collapse of North Korea and the political status of a unified Korea could emerge as major issues facing the international community.

What can be done under the circumstances? There are two points that need to be kept in mind. Better use should be made of a six-minus-one framework or the six-party talks without the participation of North Korea to deal with the problem. The other should be for the South Koreans to recognize this particular problem as their own. According to an instantaneous opinion poll conducted on Oct. 10 by the South Korean television station SBS, which asked South Koreans who was to blame for the nuclear test, 38 percent of them held the United States responsible, compared to 36 percent who blamed Pyongyang. It would be regrettable if the South Korean government's policy toward North Korea were hog-tied by public opinion of this kind.

South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun merely stuck to the “history issue” with Japan during his meeting with Abe, which was held immediately after Pyongyang’s nuclear test. Seoul does not appear determined enough to cope with the nuclear issue by taking political risks on its own. The South Korean government should be clear about what future of the Korean Peninsula it wants to build and hold talks with Japan, China, Russia and the United States about it.

Third, the bloodless coup in Thailand on Sept. 19 has been widely regarded as a failure of democracy in the country. What does the coup have to do with the future of East Asia? Our perception of the future of East Asia is based on the politics of productivity. It may sound difficult to comprehend, but, in fact, the theory is easy to understand. If various social divisions--which exist in every country--can be subsumed under a national consensus to pursue economic development and the economy then develops, raising living standards, the middle classes will grow. Such a situation encourages democracy to take root, enabling the economy to develop further.

The politics of productivity builds on these assumptions. Thailand has been hailed as a model in successfully realizing such politics. In fact, the middle classes accounted for 34 percent of the overall population in Thailand in 2000, compared with 15 percent in 1960. Therefore, democracy was thought to have planted its roots deeply in Thailand since the 1990s. But the big social divide between the center of Thailand--Bangkok--and rural areas remains intact. Per capita income in Bangkok is nine times larger than in the northeast of the country. If this were the case with Japan, it would be suicidal for any government to leave the disparity unaddressed.

Many criticisms aside, the administration of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was the first Thai government to attempt to tackle the social divide. For this reason, Thaksin was widely supported in rural areas. However, the Thai bureaucratic elite, backed by the middle-class populace in Bangkok, opted to maintain the status quo. In other words, Thailand may not follow the paths taken by Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. In Thailand, the social divisions will remain deep and contentious, and democracy will tend to oscillate between elite democracy and populist democracy. Such a phenomenon is not unique to Thailand. Countries in Southeast Asia may take on a nation-form that is different from that of Japan, South Korea or Taiwan.

As the above developments indicate, the future of East Asia may not be in line with what we have so far conceived. By resuming summit talks with China and South Korea, Abe made an auspicious start in his efforts to rebuild Japan’s diplomacy toward Asia. He is expected to take part in a summit meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum scheduled for November, to be followed by two regional summit meetings in December. One of them is the ASEAN plus Three summit meeting involving leaders of the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and Japan, China and South Korea. The other is the East Asia Summit--which is also called a summit of ASEAN plus Three plus Three, with the additional presence of the leaders of Australia, India and New Zealand.

When a serious incident such as North Korea's nuclear test happens, we have a tendency to prioritize measures against such an urgent issue while procrastinating on efforts to devise long-term strategies. Japan should take advantage of the upcoming regional summit meetings to formulate a strategic vision for forging a future order in Asia.

(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 October 22, 2006)