

# **New Development of the Japan-China-ROK Summit as Dispute Settlement Mechanism**

By ISHIGAKI Yasuji

As result of the recent double resignations of Prime Minister Hatoyama and Democratic Party Secretary General Ozawa, the Japanese Government has been again faced with a reset, causing some inevitable confusion. There is at present a mixture of hope and anxiety entertained by many, for there is no knowing yet whether the new administration's foreign policy would be one to meet the expectation of the people and to restore trust from other countries. In the meantime, in East Asia the international expert team's investigation revealed that the recent incident of the sinking of the Korean warship was most possibly caused by the torpedo fired by a North Korean submarine. North Korea strongly refuted the results of the investigation and reacted with a war footing stance, and thus, the Korean peninsula has suddenly become strained to the breaking point. It seems that the scenario of resuming the Six Party Talks, which was a heated topic just before, had been blown away afar.

The world's attention has now been shifted towards the discussions in the UN Security Council: whether it would be able to denounce North Korea's action in the name of international community and to take appropriate measures to prevent effectively the recurrence of similar incidents. Amid these events, it was particularly noted that the Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit was held in Jeju Island in Korea and dealt with this question as a de facto central issue. As well-known, the Japan-China-ROK Summit had traditionally been held very briefly at the margin of the ASEAN+3 Summit or the East Asian Summit (EAS), and it has only very recently become an annual event to be held independently of the ASEAN-related meetings, ever since the Trilateral Summit was convened in Fukuoka, Japan, during the Aso Administration, in December, 2008. Therefore, it had been decided beforehand that the recent Third Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit was to be held on May 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>, and was preceded by the meeting of the Foreign Ministers of three nations on May 15<sup>th</sup> in Jeju Island.

As the investigation report on the sinking of the Korean warship was released on May 20<sup>th</sup>, it was quite natural that this incident became a central hot issue at the Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit and serious exchange of views and discussion took place at the meeting upon this topic. Korea asserted the need for this issue to be discussed in the Security Council in order to take appropriate measures and Japan strongly supported the Korean position and requested China's cooperation, whereas China advocated the necessity of careful and calm approach to this issue to avoid an armed clash. The significance of having had such discussions at this meeting at a regional level is undeniable and great. Having a talk among Japan, China, and Korea, major powers concerned in the East Asian region before this incident was officially tabled for

discussions in the Security Council would have no doubt been useful and benefitted the United Nations for taking most appropriate treatment of this matter.

It was, however, just a sheer coincidence that a high level meeting of Japan-China-Korea to discuss such a thorny issue was actually held in such a timely manner, because that meeting was predetermined to take place at the abovementioned date and location by chance. Nevertheless, it was very significant that the said meeting produced a basic agreement of the three countries to institutionalize the Japan-China-Korea Trilateral Summit by way of establishing a permanent organization, the “Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat” in Korea in 2011. In the future, if this new institution could further enable the three countries not only to have an annual meeting, but also to convene at a request of one member state emergency trilateral talks whenever the need arises to discuss any disputed issue, and if such cases and experiences would be built up, it may develop into a political mechanism of the “East Asian Community”, which might well be termed as an epoch-making progress in the region.

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