

## **"Mutual Trust" in East Asian Regional Cooperation on the Rocks**

By ISHIGAKI Yasuji

The issue of "mutual trust" in promoting regional cooperation in East Asia was seriously discussed on the occasion of the Annual Conference of the Network of East Asian Think-tanks (NEAT), held in Beijing from August 26 to 28 of this year. The lively discussion was conducted on that issue, upon the initiative of the host country, China, who admitted herself as prime-mover of NEAT, as one of the central agenda items for that Conference in the year marking its tenth anniversary of the NEAT. Needless to say, on the importance of "mutual trust," there was a perfect consensus reached at the Conference among the representatives of NEAT member countries comprised of the ASEAN Plus Three.

As I had the opportunity of participating as a discussant from Japan in the above session, I proposed as my personal ideas several important steps toward "mutual trust" building in East Asia, including (1) increasing close dialogue/consultation mechanisms among countries in the region, (2) multilateral networking of early-warning systems and hotlines, (3) utmost transparency of state institutions including legal system, policies, military budgets and capabilities, etc. to reduce mutual distrust, (4) removal of excessive nationalistic bent in each country's educational program, (5) peaceful solution of all disputes through such established institutions as international courts and tribunals etc. and I emphasized that increased people-to-people contact through frequent visits among countries in the region should be considered as a principal pillar as a major premise for confidence-building. While my emphasis on the interchanges of persons naturally elicited no objection and was presumably accepted by other participants as agreeable or probably even self-evident, we have seen the subsequent developments in the region moving to an entirely opposite direction.

Thus, in the wake of intensifying territorial disputes, it was most regretful that various interchanges of persons among countries at both governmental and private-sector levels were suddenly suspended or postponed by the unilateral political actions of China. They included a wide range of measures such as cancellation of events to mark the 40th anniversary of normalization of diplomatic ties between Japan and China, non-attendance of high-level persons to the Annual Meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group

held in Tokyo which were important multilateral conferences of non-political nature, non-dispatch of film directors to the Tokyo International Film Festival, and cancellation of various business-related events. These caused concerns and were speculated among many intellectuals about the true intention of Chinese authorities. With South Korea as well, there exist some strains related to territorial and historical issues, fortunately the interchanges of persons have not so much affected as they have been between Japan and China.

The current situation between Japan and China is a matter for serious concern as the interchanges of people have been extremely hampered not only in the government-to-government relations but also in the cultural fields and under the programs involving local authorities. At the governmental level, there only remain very limited mutual visits of senior officials between the foreign ministries of Japan and China at vice-ministerial and director-general levels as they agree that the two countries should maintain close communications at the time of discrepancy in opinions. Fortunately, to my relief, such important meetings as Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit and ASEAN Plus Three Summit have not been subject to adverse effect as yet. However, it appears inevitable that bilateral high-level talks usually set up back-to-back with these conferences would be affected in one way or another. Hence, we should remain alert to future developments in the region with due attention to the above-mentioned issues.

**(This is an English translation of the article written by Mr. ISHIGAKI Yasuji, Delegate for Japan to AALCO, as his personal view which originally appeared on the BBS “Hyakka-Somei” of CEAC on November 4, 2012.)**