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Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit Should Discuss how to enhance its Role and Usefulness

By ISHIGAKI Yasuji

Since last September, due to tough attitude and measures taken by China over the Senkaku issues, Japan-China relations have suffered severe negative effects not only in political and economic spheres but also in the spheres of cultural and human exchanges. They are as yet far from being normalized. One finds some relief at normalcy which is returning to the human exchanges on the private-sector between the two countries. Under those circumstances, in recent months important changes took place in the high political leadership in Japan and China. China's policy toward Japan under its new leadership attracts much attention. While the appointment of Wang Yi, a Japan expert, as Foreign Minister might imply China's cautious attitude in advancing policy toward Japan, several statements already made by Chinese new leaders as well as the fact the visit of Tang Jiaxuan, Chairman of China-Japan Friendship Association, to Japan, reportedly scheduled in late March, has been postponed due to the regime change warrant no optimism. As for Japan-ROK relations, on the other hand, people tend to entertain some hope for improvement under the new presidency of Park Geun-hye after they were soured considerably under the previous ROK administration. However, the differences over territorial and historical issues between the two countries remain as serious as ever.

Meanwhile, on a multilateral basis, it is encouraging that a basic agreement on the launch of Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) comprising ASEAN plus 6 including Japan, China and ROK remains valid, and the high-level FTA negotiations among Japan, China and ROK have recently started. Furthermore, it is particularly good news that Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit Meeting, which was held five times in the past, is reported to be currently discussed with a view to holding a next meeting in coming May. The Trilateral Summit has been held on rotation among Japan, China and ROK, as its first Meeting took place in Fukuoka in December 2008 hosted by then Prime Minister ASO Taro, the second in Beijing, China in October 2009, the third in Jeju, ROK in May 2010, the fourth in Tokyo in May 2011 and the fifth in Beijing, China in May 2012. After concluding an international instrument in accordance with the agreement reached at the third Meeting, a permanent secretariat under management by a Secretary-General, Deputy Secretary-Generals and other staff members

dispatched from the three countries, was established in Seoul in September 2011.

At the first Meeting of Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit, it was decided that the Meeting should be held on a regular basis and was agreed that it should be held once a year in principle. However, a specific date setting of the Meeting seems to be subject to consultation and arrangement each year as the occasion approaches. Since the third Meeting, it has become customary to hold the Summit during the month of May. However, with regard to this year's Meeting, it appears that consultations have long been going on as to whether the Meeting should be held as usual in May and, if yes, on which exact date. Hence the date of the Meeting has not yet been officially announced. It has also been the practice that the length of time set and spent for discussion on official agenda at each of the Summit Meetings in the past are such short time as only two hours in one day, with the exception of the third Meeting in Seoul which lasted over two days with two sessions. The Summit Meeting has proved useful as a forum where the top political leaders of the three countries discuss various questions of common interest as well as the situations in the region. Especially, it is to be noted that the Meeting has come to play an effective role in addressing some cases of conflict in the region, as a specific reference was made to the incident of sinking of the ROK navy ship "Cheonan, in a Joint Press Release issued after the third Meeting, stating that " the leaders of the three countries expressed condolences to the loss of lives caused by this incident, attached importance to the joint investigation conducted by the ROK and other countries, and took note of the reactions of various parties. The three countries will keep in contact and properly address the matter so as to maintain peace and stability in the region."

However, in order to render the Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit more useful, the three countries should agree in principle to determine the date of the Meeting on a specific day of the week in a specific month, instead of discussing the date anew each year. At the same time, they should announce their firm determination both at home and externally that the Summit Meeting shall always be held on that specific date with minimum adjustments to be required, no matter how stringent the political situation surrounding the countries and region may turn out around each occasion. It is further suggested that the Meeting be held twice a year when necessary, considering that only one meeting might not be sufficient to deal with a complex situation, and that the Summit Meeting be well coordinated with Foreign Minister's Meetings. It is earnestly hoped that, at the forthcoming Summit Meeting, in-depth discussion will take place not only on the regional situation and other specific issues but also on the question of desired modalities of holding the Meeting to enhance its role and effectiveness to a utmost extent.

(This is an English translation of the article written by Mr. ISHIGAKI Yasuji, Delegate

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