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## **The Case for a Positive View of the state of Current East Asia as in a “Shakedown Period”**

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In recent months, very pessimistic views are often heard on the current situation in the East Asian region. Some experts even go to the extreme of arguing that territorial disputes such as those relating to the Senkaku Islands and the South China Sea could any moment ignite outbreaks of military clashes. I for one do not exclude possibilities of any worst situation to be caused from those disputes. However, when we consider objectively the overall situation in the region, I consider that a more positive view is fitting regarding the current situation in the region for the following reasons.

In the first place, it should be admitted that the international relations in East Asia at present have much to be improved in many areas, in particular, for instance, for more opportunities of direct talks between political leaders, as seen in the relations between Japan and China, Japan and South Korea, and between some ASEAN nations and China. However, at the working levels bilateral relations among the countries of ASEAN+3 are functioning quite normally, including those between Japan, China, and South Korea. Also, multilateral frameworks for regional cooperation among those ASEAN+3 countries have been working very well, and the regular summit meetings among them have consistently been held smoothly.

Secondly, even with regard to the most sensitive relations among Japan, China, and South Korea, the institution of the permanent Secretariat for Trilateral Cooperation which was established in Seoul in September 2011 to promote cooperation among them, has been functioning well. The former Japanese Ambassador to Austria Shigeo Iwatani assumed the office of Second Secretary-General for a two-year term on September 1 this year, succeeding to the first Secretary-General Shin Bong-kil of South Korea. The Secretariat executes among others the task as necessary of holding the trilateral meetings on both ministerial and Summit level of Japan, China, and South Korea.

Thirdly, the talks on territorial and other questions in the South China Sea started in China in September in order to define the Code of Conduct to settle the disputes and

ease tensions between China and the member states of the ASEAN, including the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia, and the said talks have been reported to be currently making some progress. In parallel with those moves, negotiations for the Japanese-Chinese-South Korean FTA and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) of ASEAN+6 have been under way. Furthermore, such annual meetings as the Network of East Asian Think-tanks (NEAT) on the second track, and the East Asian Forum on the 1.5th track were also held successfully this year, in Malaysia and Japan respectively.

As mentioned above, the frameworks and the infrastructure of regional cooperation in East Asia are as firmly as ever rooted and sound today, and we should note in particular that important economic negotiations, as well as regular intergovernmental and second track dialogues are conducted as matters of business as usual without much delay and disruptions. Although in the trilateral relations among Japan, China, and South Korea, there remains the fact that Chinese official vessels keep intruding Japanese territorial waters, the Chinese authorities appear keeping such moves as anti-Japanese mass rallies under control, and the Yasukuni issue has not developed into an issue of big magnitude.

Under the above circumstances, the governments and private business sectors in Japan and other Asia-Pacific countries have been reconsidering to rectify hitherto excessive dependence on China, and shifting investments to ASEAN markets. With regard to the flow of people, we also find a noteworthy change that the number of tourists visiting Japan from ASEAN nations has recently been showing a marked increase. In terms of the overall balance of power in ASEAN+3, these changes will provoke favorable trends that will quietly bring about an “adjustment” effect of lowering or shifting excessive economic dependence on China to other countries in Asia more evenly, for a “shakedown” towards more desirable interdependence among nations in the region.

**(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 e-forum “Hyakka-Somei” of CEAC on September 23, 2013.)**