

# **What Japan-China Relations Should be Like**

—A Plenary Speech on Towards Peaceful Coexistence and  
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**T**he more complex and difficult international relations get, the more we should engage in candid and constructive dialogue. Otherwise, the entangled coil of threads will only become tighter.

## **I. China-US Rivalry and Japan's Strategic Role**

In June 2021, I published an article titled “US-China Rivalry and Japan’s Strategic Role” in the *Washington Quarterly*. In this article, I expressed the following views: As China and the US move closer to parity in national strength, the so-called “Thucydides Trap” would lead to long-term confrontation between the two countries. If China and the US, two major powers, engage themselves in fierce zero-sum competition, the peace and prosperity of the world, especially that of East Asia, will be in jeopardy. To me,

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this is a deep concern. I also maintain that Japan and the US should not fall into the values trap and should not abandon their policy of engaging China. At the same time, I believe that China could consider playing a greater role as a major power by voluntarily forgoing the special and differential treatment dispensed by the World Trade Organization. Additionally, I made suggestions on building an Asian Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and developing international standards on information and communications technology that do not exclude China, and advocated for Japan to play a strategic role as a bridge between China and the US.

It has been more than three years since the article was published. To my regret, the situation has not developed in the way as I wished, but evolved in a worrisome direction.

## **II. The Regrettable Situation in Japan**

For some time, the Japanese government has not only failed to be a bridge between China and the US, but has instead become the most “cooperative” partner of the US in military and diplomatic affairs. This points to the notable trend of Japan’s subservience to the US after its defeat in World War II. However, the Japanese government recently seems to be turning the tables and “urging” the US not to soften its policy towards China. I believe this is mainly because the prevailing view within the Japanese government is becoming increasingly antagonistic towards China, claiming that it is “necessary to confront China with strength”.

In December 2022, the new *National Security Strategy* approved by the Japanese Cabinet identified China as “an

unprecedented and the greatest strategic challenge”. At the same time, the document described Taiwan as “an extremely important partner and a precious friend of Japan, with whom Japan shares fundamental values, including democracy, and has close economic and personal ties”. This contrast is more explicit and extreme compared with the characterization in the US National Security Strategy adopted by the Biden administration.

After the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in February 2022, Prime Minister Kishida repeatedly stated on various occasions at home and abroad that “today’s Ukraine could be tomorrow’s East Asia”. In fact, this has nothing to do with China, and linking it with the so-called “Taiwan contingency” is groundless and far-fetched. However, in order to justify Japan’s excessive build-up of its defense capabilities and its antagonistic policy towards China, Japanese politicians and bureaucrats have been using this rhetoric frequently.

A recent worrying trend is that the new leader of Taiwan region seems to be exploiting the confrontation between China and the US to advance more radical views. On May 20, Lai Ching-te’s inaugural speech went far beyond the scope of his predecessor’s speech, which was a shock to me. This not only contradicts the basic understanding that underpins the normalization of relations between Japan and China, but also poses a threat to regional peace and stability. In recent years, Japanese and American politicians have continuously sent wrong signals to Taiwan, indirectly encouraging the deviant behaviors of the new leader of Taiwan region. The leaders of Taiwan region would be gravely mistaken if they believe that “as long as they champion democracy, they will receive support no matter what they do”. It is necessary for

the Japanese and American governments to clearly demonstrate that they give no support in both words and actions to “Taiwan independence”.

### **III. Japan Should Play the Role of a Bridge between China and the US**

Despite the current situation as described above, I still hold the same view as manifested in the article three years ago.

Recently, there has been an increase in pessimism among Japanese people towards the Chinese economy. However, as long as the Chinese government does not disrupt the “environment that stimulates entrepreneurship”, I believe that the Chinese economy can overcome the aftereffect of the real estate problem and the negative impact of population decline, achieving economic growth superior to that of the US. The US economic security policies will only have a short-term impact on industries and sectors where Western companies have an absolute advantage. In the competition with the US, the failure of the Soviet Union was attributed to the lack of economic and technological power, not weaker military strength. Today’s China is completely different from either Japan after the collapse of the bubble economy or the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War. China’s national strength will continue to be on par with the US in the future, and thus the confrontation between China and the US will also persist in the long term.

I firmly believe that it is in Japan’s best interest to act as a bridge between China and the US, playing a role in easing and managing the confrontation between the two countries. Once Japan and the US engage in military conflict with China, regardless of

the outcome, all parties involved will suffer devastating blows. Therefore, the goal of Japan's national strategy must be to prevent wars. However, in the face of an increasingly prominent power like China, if one wants to threaten and contain it through military force, it is nothing but a fantasy even with the help of the US. Furthermore, if Japan and the US want to "add fuel to the fire" on the Taiwan issue, it would be even more counterproductive.

To avoid crises, taking care of each other's core major concerns, preventing misunderstandings and misjudgments, and engaging in thorough communication are indispensable. And Japan can play a major role in this regard. It has the strength of a middle power, is located between China and the US, and hosts US military bases. All these put Japan in a unique position to mediate between China and the US. As long as it has the intention, Japan can fully play a more important role as a bridge between China and the US than any other country.

Of course, Japan cannot gain the trust of China without changing its obedient and submissive attitude to the US. This is the premise for any progress to be made. However, it is regrettable that the current Japan-China relations still have a long way to go. Since the Chinese and US presidents met in November last year, ministerial-level exchanges and dialogues between the two countries have increased. Despite the underlying tone of confrontation in bilateral relations, both sides are advancing the so-called "guardrail diplomacy". Recently, European countries and Australia have eclipsed Japan by engaging in more active communication with China.

On the other hand, there are also signs of strengthening

communication and dialogue between Japan and China. On May 27 this year, the leaders of Japan, China and the Republic of Korea held a trilateral summit in Seoul after a hiatus of four and a half years. Subsequently, Liu Jianchao, Minister of the International Department of the CPC Central Committee, visited Japan and held talks with Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and leaders of major political parties in Japan. In mid-May, a delegation of 20 colonel-level officers from the Chinese People's Liberation Army visited Japan after a break of 5 years and exchanged views with the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. I heard that Kenji Kanasugi, the Japanese Ambassador to China, also visited various parts of China, actively promoting economic and people-to-people exchanges between the two countries. From the bottom of my heart, I am pleased with the positive momentum of such interactions between Japan and China. However, it remains to be seen whether such communication can continue and produce concrete results. Whether or not political exchanges can take root will be a major key to improving Japan-China relations in the future.

#### **IV. Two Suggestions**

In order for Japanese politics to move in a way that is conducive to communication with China, it is essential to improve the sentiments of the Japanese people towards China. Therefore, I would like to make two suggestions.

First, promptly restore the policy of visa-exemption on short-term visits to China for Japanese citizens. It has been repeatedly proven by the past that the Japanese who have visited China and the Chinese who have visited Japan would have better impressions of each other's countries. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic,

Japanese tourists are more inclined to visit Republic of Korea and Taiwan region, and keep their distance from the mainland of China. One main reason is that Japanese citizens previously enjoyed visa-exemption entry to China for stays up to 15 days, but now they need to apply for a visa through cumbersome procedures. I believe that the Japanese government should also adopt a more flexible visa policy for Chinese government officials, which will be beneficial for China to make a decision to restore visa-exemption on short-term visits for Japanese citizens. Said that, the Chinese government needs to understand that if it delays changing its visa policy because of the Japanese government's rigid response, the anti-Chinese sentiment among the Japanese public will only worsen.

Second, the Japanese and Chinese governments should reaffirm the four point principled agreement reached in November 2014. The four point principled agreement clearly stipulates that in the face of divergent claims over disputed islands, Japan and China should prevent the situation from aggravating through dialogue and consultation, and establish crisis management mechanisms to avoid contingencies. For most Japanese citizens, Taiwan is ultimately not their own issue. However, once the situation concerning the relevant islands becomes tense, Japanese citizens will perceive it as "their own issue", thus dampening their sentiments towards China. The four point principled agreement was a government-to-government agreement reached during the Abe administration, but its positioning is still somewhat ambiguous. I sincerely hope that the content of the four point principled agreement can be confirmed in the near future through a higher-level political document between the two countries, similar to the four political documents such as the Japan-China Joint Statement.

I have long advocated for an East Asian community based on the spirit of mutual respect, mutual understanding, and mutual assistance. The vision is to establish meeting mechanisms on various issues, with Japan, China, and South Korea at the core, covering Southeast Asia and other regions. The purpose is to enhance mutual trust, build consensus, and establish common norms of behaviors. People may think that “the current situation in the East Asian region is a far cry from it”. I have to face this reality, too. However, at the same time, if China and the US continue to confront each other, peace and stability in the region will be out of the question, which is also a fact. We must not hate each other because of different values, but rather respect, understand, and help each other based on the recognition of differences in values and systems. What is most needed now is for us not to give up on our ideals, but to start from what we can do now and continuously scale up efforts. 🌐