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Tenser in Southwest Asia, Calmer in East Asia

—Perspectives in Mid-2008—

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Masashi Nishihara*

The replacement of leaders often changes the security environment of a region, and from mid-2007 through mid-2008, the new leaders of several countries in the Asia Pacific region have changed its political climate and international relations. The result has been that as tensions have increased in Southwest Asia, they have decreased in East Asia.

More Political Violence in Southwest Asia

The Assassination of Benazir Bhutto

Many factors have contributed to the current tensions on the Indian subcontinent and in Afghanistan. Notable among them was the assassination on December 27, 2007, of Benazir Bhutto, a former prime minister and the head of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). In October, Bhutto returned home from an eight-year exile. She was greeted enthusiastically, especially since the sitting president, Pervez Musharaf had become

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extremely unpopular owing to his poor handling of domestic politics such as the abortive dismissal of the chief justice of Pakistan's supreme court. Musharaf, who also was army chief of staff in control of Pakistan's most powerful political machine, resigned from this position on November 29, to establish the pretense of a civilian government. Bhutto began to campaign for general elections scheduled for January 2008, when she was shot to death.

In addition, the United States wanted to steer Musharaf to form a coalition civilian government with Bhutto, who supported the United States and opposed the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Complicating the situation was the relationship between Bhutto and her staunch political rival, Nawaz Sharif, who also had returned to Pakistan from seven years in exile. Who shot Bhutto in a vehicle moving in the midst of a politically agitated and uncontrolled crowd on the street remains to be identified. But the incident drastically changed the political map. The general elections, which were delayed, finally took place in February and produced a slim majority for the PPP, who is co-chaired by Bhutto's husband, Asif Ali Zardari, and their son. The consequently fragile coalition government of the PPP and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) has made Pakistani politics even less stable.

The Weak Civilian Government and the Growth of Terrorists

Unlike Musharaf, who attempted to confront the Islamic terrorists, the new prime minister offered to negotiate with them, which has been widely seen as a sign of the government's weakness. The Taliban insurgents have expanded their area of control in Pakistan and have become more violent. The number of bombing incidents attributed to the Taliban has increased in the major cities, further damaging the credibility of the coalition government.

The Taliban also uses Pakistan's border tribal areas to train and send terrorists to Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as a convenient place to tax local resources and smuggle opium. In Pakistan, then, the terrorists are filling a political and administrative vacuum.

On June 13, 2008, Taliban militants blew up the front gate of the largest prison in Kandahar, southern Afghanistan, permitting nearly one thousand Taliban prisoners to escape. Then on July 8, a car-bomb attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul killed forty-one people and wounded more than 130.

Since 2001, India has been assisting Afghanistan with its largest foreign aid package, training civil servants, and building a vital passage into resource-rich Central Asia. Pakistan, however, considers the India-Afghan partnership against the Taliban to be endangering its own national security. In fact, when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, Pakistan was its main supporter. Therefore, if India were to consider sending troops to Afghanistan, it would result in widening the war on terrorism in Southwest Asia, bringing Pakistan and the Taliban even closer. Another fear is a military coup in Pakistan. In addition, the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, has accused Pakistan of being involved in the bombings in his country, including the car-bombing at the Indian embassy. Thus for Afghanistan, too, Pakistan's conciliatory approach has only exacerbated the tension.

The Response by the U.S. and ISAF

Pakistan's new conciliatory posture toward the Taliban and Al Qaeda under the civilian rule has naturally made Washington highly apprehensive of the growth of the Taliban and the future of a nuclear Pakistan. During the past year Washington has sent more forces in Afghanistan, and NATO has sent 20,000 forces more for its International Security

Assistance Forces (ISAF) to southern Afghanistan, still the Taliban's stronghold. Washington is reportedly considering adding another 10,000 troops. The U.S. and NATO thus must contend with weak governments in both Kabul and Islamabad. The Taliban is increasingly using Pakistan's border areas as a sanctuary from ISAF and U.S. forces, which has added to the United States' and the ISAF's difficulties with Pakistan. Indeed, how can the United States and its coalition forces effectively fight the Taliban and bring about a civilian democracy in Pakistan? This will be one of the principal challenges for the new U.S. administration in 2009.

Tensions Falling in East Asia

Five New Leaders Changing the Political Climate

By contrast, tensions are falling in East Asia. Five new leaders took office between September 2007 and March 2008—Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda of Japan (September), Prime Minister Kevin Rudd of Australia (November), President Lee Myun-bak of South Korea (February), President Dmitri Medvedev of Russia (March), and President Ma Yin-jeou of Taiwan (March)—all of whom have helped transform the political climate in East Asia.

Fukuda, who replaced Shinzo Abe on short notice in September, has taken a much more conciliatory posture toward Beijing. First, he promised even before he was installed as prime minister that he would not visit the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, a decision that Beijing welcomed. Second, Fukuda ended Abe's diplomatic initiative of promoting security links among Japan, the United States, Australia, and India. In addition, Abe's

foreign minister, Taro Aso, had advocated close links with the new democracies in the “arc of freedom and prosperity,” stretching from the Asia Pacific to Central Asia and eastern Europe, but Fukuda has discontinued this initiative as well.

Also sensitive to China’s reactions, Australia’s new prime minister, Kevin Rudd, decided not to continue the policy of the former prime minister, John Howard, toward China.

The election of President Lee Myun-bak, an ex-Hyundai CEO, similarly changed the climate in Northeast Asia by shifting the North Korea policy that his predecessor, Rho Moon-hyun, had pursued for the last four years. Instead, Lee has instituted a tit-for-tat policy to replace Rho’s conciliatory “sunshine” policy. He declared that South Korea’s economic assistance to North Korea would now be coordinated with the pace of North Korea’s denuclearization. Lee also reversed his predecessor’s policy and moved to restore South Korea’s partnership with Japan and its alliance with the United States. Unlike his predecessor, President Lee has refrained from referring to South Korea’s role as that of an intermediary between Washington and Pyongyang, a move that has changed the political climate of the Korean peninsula. However, eager to rebuild the relationship with Washington, he decided to open the Korean market for controversial American beef too hastily, causing widespread popular anger over fears of mad cow disease. As a result, Lee’s popularity has plummeted.

In the meantime, the March election of Ma Yin-jeou in Taipei has also influenced the relations between Taipei and Beijing, Taipei and Washington, and Taipei and Tokyo. The rapprochement between Taipei and Beijing began with the meeting of the top leaders of Beijing’s Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait and Taipei’s Strait Exchange Foundation, the visit by Kuomintang leaders to Beijing, and weekend chartered flights and reciprocal visits between Taiwan and China. Ironically, the lowering of

cross-strait tensions, however, may have weakened relations between Taipei and Washington, particularly their military cooperation, although President Ma has mentioned that he will not make concessions on Taiwan's security.

The Russians elected Dmitri Medvedev to succeed President Vladimir Putin who, by taking the position of prime minister, has remained as the de facto leader of Russia. For his first foreign visit, in May, President Medvedev went to Kazakhstan to talk about Russia-Kazakhstan-China pipeline links and access to that country's oil and natural gas, much of which is now being diverted to China. Because the competition between Moscow and Beijing over access to natural resources in Central Asia has become so fierce, it was not surprising that Medvedev chose China as his second country to visit as President.

Relations Have Improved in East Asia

On the whole, international relations have improved in East Asia, especially Chinese-Japanese, South Korean-U.S., Japanese-South Korean, and cross-strait relations, as well as those in the six-party talks. (Since late June, relations between Japan and South Korea have become tenser again, this time because of Tokyo's decision to educate school children about the Japanese claim to Takeshima islands [Dokdo, in Korean]). The region's political and security climate was tested by three major incidents, all of which were related to China: the Tibetan revolt in March, the disorderly Olympic torch relays in April and May, and the enormous earthquake in Sichuan Province in May. Yet East Asia has managed to survive what could have been political turmoil. None of G8 Summit leaders, who met in Toyako in early July, strongly criticized President Hu Jingtao's handling of the Tibetan minority. President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, President George W. Bush, and

Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda expressed their intention to attend the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympic Games on August 8. Whether or not relations in East Asia have really changed, however, is not clear, for North Korea's denuclearization and relations between Japan and China still are precarious.

North Korea's Intentions Still Suspicious

North Korea's Tactics of Prolongation

North Korea's denuclearization is, nonetheless, an important example of declining tensions in the region. Compared with the situation in October 2006 when it conducted its nuclear tests, relations with North Korea since then have been manageable and seem to be moving—albeit slowly—toward this goal. Moreover, the participants in the six-party talks have maintained relatively cooperative relations.

During the past year, however, North Korea has continued to prolong its denuclearization process and to extract maximum economic returns. The United States, in contrast, has alternated between hawkish and conciliatory stands, and as the end of his term approaches, Bush has been driven by his desire to burnish his administration's diplomatic legacy, all of which have affected U.S.-North Korean negotiations.

The joint agreement of February 13, 2007, announced the following three-stage process of denuclearization: In the first stage, all North Korean nuclear activities would cease, including the shutdown of nuclear facilities in Yonbyon, in return for 50,000 tons of heavy oil from the other five parties to the talks (although Japan refused to join until the issue of its abducted citizens was settled). In the second stage, North Korea would

disable all its nuclear facilities and disclose all its nuclear programs, in return for 950,000 tons of heavy oil. Finally in the third stage, North Korea would dismantle its nuclear weapons, in return for the construction of light water nuclear reactors and other energy and economic assistance.

During the first stage, however, which was supposed to be completed within sixty days, North Korea demanded the return of US\$25 million in assets frozen at the Banco Delta Asia in Macao. Although this was not part of the February 13 agreement, the United States consented. But because the return of the assets was complicated, it was not completed until June 21, so the first stage lasted about two months longer than scheduled.

Consequently, the six-party talks to negotiate the second stage did not begin until July 18, and again North Korea delayed the talks by demanding, among others, the repair of its power stations. The parties finally met on September 27 and reached a joint agreement on October 3 that North Korea disable, with the U.S. financial aid, three major nuclear facilities by the end of the year. By the end of 2007, North Korea would disclose all its nuclear programs, in return for the rest of one million tons of heavy oil promised earlier plus the United States' promise to remove North Korea from its list of terrorist states.

North Korean-Syrian Connections

North Korea's denuclearization stalled yet another time in the fall, when U.S. newspapers reported in September that Israel had removed nuclear materials and then bombed a site in northern Syria. Washington revealed that secret photos showed North Korean workers on the site. (On April 28, 2008, President Bush official confirmed North Korean-Syrian nuclear connections.)

North Korea's links with Syria angered Washington's conservative camp, which argued against providing any help to Pyongyang. Although Pyongyang naturally denied its nuclear assistance to Syria, but its sincerity was questioned. North Korea also has kept silent about its suspected program on enriched uranium, which the United States had originally disclosed in October 2002.

Despite U.S. conservatives' strong opposition to making concessions to North Korea, President Bush sided with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill in moving ahead. In December, President Bush sent a letter to Party Secretary Kim Jong Ill to urging him to observe the October 3 agreement. In the meantime, North Korea complained about the slow supply of heavy oil and did not meet the deadline of December 31 in issuing a declaration of the disablement of its nuclear programs and reporting on its nuclear programs.

In February 2008 the New York Philharmonic Orchestra went to Pyongyang for a historic live-televised concert. It was the first time that the U.S. national anthem was sung there, with North Korean officials standing in front of the U.S. flag on the stage at the concert hall. Nonetheless, the declaration had to be delayed till June 26, 2008, when North Korea submitted to China, chair of the six-party talks, a sixty-page document. North Korea deemed it "a complete and correct declaration." North Korea also handed to the United States a short classified document regarding its links with Syria and the whereabouts of the enriched uranium. This time the process was delayed for half year.

North Korea's June 26 Declaration and U.S. Hasty Concessions

Again, the United States made hasty concessions. The Bush administration notified the Congress that it would remove North Korea from its list of terrorist states. Originally its

removal was to accompany the normalization of U.S.-North Korea relations. In addition, the delisting will take effect in forty-five days, namely, August 11, 2008. The six-party talks met on July 10 to discuss how to verify the June 26 declaration, but could not reach an agreement. They and the United States reportedly plan to complete the verification before the end of October. Most likely, the U.S. will not postpone the delisting beyond August 11, although many specialists argue that first the June 26 declaration should be verified and that the exact links between North Korea and Syria be identified. If it delays any longer, the United States fears that the whole process may be damaged. But Washington's hasty concessions have put it in an extremely awkward position.

In addition, Japan is very dissatisfied with Washington's decision on delisting. Tokyo counted on President Bush's keeping North Korea on the United States' list of terrorist states, to pressure North Korea to release more information about the Japanese abductees. But now that it is no longer regarded as a terrorist state, North Korea has no incentive to release more information to Japan about the abductees. Moreover, it is entitled to substantial economic aid through such major international banks as the World Bank. Washington's precipitate decision to delist North Korea has now created new tension between Japan and the United States.

U.S.-North Korean Talks with Four "Observers"

Furthermore, the six-party talks have increasingly taken the form of U.S.-North Korean talks with "four observers." Of the four "observers," China, as the chair, plays a special role. Yet, in reality the United States is singlehandedly negotiating with North Korea. The lack of coordination among Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul has placed both of Washington's Asian allies in a difficult position. This is unfortunate, especially since the

new South Korean leader, Lee Myung-bak, has tried to strengthen his country's ties with the United States as well as Japan.

Nevertheless, the negotiations with North Korea have not been marred by the international tensions created in the wake of the protests in Tibet and during the Olympic torch relays. President Hu Jintao's official visit to Tokyo went smoothly. China's role as the chair of the six-party talks also has apparently not been weakened. Its vice president, Xi Jinping, visited Pyongyang on June 18 and urged Kim Jong Ill to keep the six-party talks moving, which certainly contributed to their resumption on June 26 and July 10.

North Korea will continue to apply its skillful tactics to prolong the denuclearization process and to extract maximum economic returns. The joint statement of the six-party talks of September 2005 mentioned, among other things, that North Korea "committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs," and that it should also return at an early date to the NPT (Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons) and to IAEA safeguards. Will North Korea ever give up its nuclear weapons? There will be no way to see this goal achieved during the Bush administration. How to bring about North Korea to abandon its nuclear programs will be a big challenge for the new presidency.

A New Phase for Japan and China

Improved Tokyo-Beijing Relations

Relations among the three trans-Pacific powers—Japan, the United States, and China—have changed since Japan's leader, Yasuo Fukuda, took office in September 2007.

Fukuda does not want to upset foreign countries, nor does China's President Hu, who appears to want good working relations with Japan despite the opposition forces he faces inside his country. It is too early to determine whether Hu has made a strategic change to seek long-term stable and equal relations with Japan or a tactical shift to show short-term friendly relations with Japan just to get through, without incident, the Beijing Olympic Games and the 2010 World Trade Fair to be held in Shanghai.

In December 2007, when Fukuda visited Beijing, Hu made conciliatory moves on the highly controversial maritime boundary issue. In return, Fukuda muted his criticism in January 2008 when frozen dumplings imported from China were found to contain poisonous pesticides, which naturally caused great anger in Japan. Then in February, China's public security authorities stated that after conducting a "thorough investigation," they had found nothing wrong on their side, and so blamed the incident on Japan. The Japanese public was furious, suspecting that the Chinese authorities had covered up the truth. Prime Minister Fukuda, however, curiously referred to China's "thorough investigation" as a "positive posture."

After March 14, when Chinese armed police carried out an extensive and harsh crackdown on antigovernment demonstrations by Tibetans, the Japanese public was deeply critical of the Chinese government's behavior. But Fukuda again restrained himself from making any controversial remarks. During President Hu Jintao's official visit for a few days from May 6, he did not criticize Hu publicly, although privately he suggested that China try to create an atmosphere that would make all countries at the Olympic Games feel welcome. Fukuda's cordial gesture might have contributed to an unexpected agreement on May 18 regarding joint development of seabed resources around the disputed boundary areas, although the actual solution of the boundary was put off.

In turn, this nascent partnership encouraged Japan to offer assistance on May 12 when a massive earthquake struck Sichuan Province. China accepted a Japanese rescue team equipped with high-tech devices as well as medical teams. China also accepted, initially and unofficially, Japanese emergency goods such as blankets and tents, to be transported by an Air Self-Defense Force airplane. But the offer was rejected by the People's Liberation Army authorities, who feared anti-Japanese protests from the public. Nonetheless, the whole episode was indicative of the improved political climate of the two countries.

A Maritime Self-Defense Force escort ship (destroyer) visited China for a few days starting on June 24, 2008, as a confidence-building measure for the two countries. It was the first visit that a Japanese military ship had entered a Chinese port since World War II. The purpose was to reciprocate a similar visit by a Chinese naval ship to the Tokyo Bay in November 2007. Zhangjiang, a remote naval port in southern China, reportedly was chosen because of Chinese authorities' fear of anti-Japanese demonstrations.

Anti-Japanese Sentiment Still Strong

Although government-to-government relations seem to have improved, the public sentiment in both countries continues to be hostile toward each other. Most Japanese point to serious crimes committed by Chinese living illegally in Japan, anti-Japanese sentiment in China, restriction of freedom of press and assembly in China, the lack of safety of Chinese-made food and toys, and, most recently, Tibet and air pollution. Most Chinese refer to wartime Japanese treatment of Chinese people as a major source of their hatred and to Japanese control of the Senkaku (Daioyu, in Chinese) islands.

The Chinese people's hostility toward the Japanese has deeper roots than those of Japanese people's hostility toward Chinese. Even the education of Chinese children is anti-Japanese and includes visits to war museums to see photos of Japanese atrocities. Consequently, when President Hu Jintao wishes to establish a partnership with Japan, he must take extreme care with what he says about Japan and China's relations with Japan. For example, when the Chinese government announced on May 18 that it had reached a joint agreement with Japan to develop oil and natural gas reserves in the East China Sea, Chinese responded on the Internet with condemnations of their government. And when the news spread that a Japanese military plane might fly to China with earthquake-related emergency goods spread, the government again was condemned, leading to the cancellation of the flight.

In the spring of 2008, Chinese youths in major cities demonstrated on the streets during the Olympic torch relay. They also staged a boycott in front of Carrefour, a popular French chain store, to protect the torch play runners who had been harassed in Paris. But there were no repeats of the anti-Japanese demonstrations or boycotts that had taken place in April 2005. Nonetheless, such anti-Japanese disturbances could easily be reignited.

The Beijing Olympic Games, which are scheduled to start on August 8, are highly likely to be an occasion for Chinese nationalism or antiforeign sentiment. In particular, if a Chinese team should lose to Japan, Chinese authorities may not be able to control the wrath of its Chinese supporters. The two governments will thus be hard put to maintain their fragile relations. The stability of Tokyo-Beijing relations, however, is a key to both peace and stability in East Asia and the stability of trans-Pacific relations of the major powers. The situation is calmer but still uneasy in East Asia.