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Panel: Could Be Worse? China-Japan Relations

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Talking Points for: Kato Yoichi, The Asashi Shimbun

- (1) How did the recent improvement happen?
 - Japan-China relations made a modest but, nonetheless, substantial turn for improvement when Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and China’s President Xi Jinping held the first one-on-one meeting in November in Beijing on the sidelines of the APEC meeting.
 - The key to this breakthrough was the 4-point agreement, which was worked out prior to the meeting.
 - As preconditions for a Xi-Abe meeting, China demanded guarantees that Abe would never visit Yasukuni Shrine again and that the Japanese government will acknowledge the existence of territorial disputes over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.
 - The 4-point agreement did address these two issues among other things, but not in a clear manner.
 - These points were intentionally left ambiguous, because both countries recognized that an immediate fix was not possible.
 - This mutual acceptance of the “ambiguity” could be argued as a sign of emerging wisdom and strength of the bilateral relations.

- (2) Why did the change happen?
 - The improvement of bilateral relations was necessary for both Abe and Xi.
 - Abe needed it to survive the national-wide election of the Diet, which took place soon after the APEC meeting. The stalemate in diplomatic relations with China could have been a political vulnerability. Abe succeeded in eliminating this weakness and achieved a victory.
 - For Xi, it was also necessary for two reasons. One is to avoid the embarrassment as the host of the APEC leaders meeting. If the meeting with Abe did not happen, it could have damaged Xi’s image and credibility as the leader both at home and abroad. Xi also needed to have this meeting with Abe to improve economic relations with Japan. Economic growth is closely connected with the legitimacy of Communist Party rule.

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- (3) Is the improvement sustainable?
- The Abe-Xi meeting changed the tone of the bilateral relationship, especially in the business sector. But substantial change in government-to-government relations has not occurred yet. It is mainly because China was skeptical of the statement that Abe will issue this summer to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the end of WWII. China has doubts that Abe may use this new statement to erase the Murayama Statement, Japan’s forthright apology for the nation’s past atrocities. China now takes a wait-and-see attitude.
 - It remains to be seen, if the bilateral relations can move forward beyond this statement.
- (4) What is the role for the United States?
- There are basically two ways that the United States can contribute to the improvement of these bilateral relations.
 - One is the power balancer. The past history shows that China backs down from its assertive, aggressive behavior only when it is confronted by a stronger power. The recent improvement of Japan-China relations is the case in point. It can be argued that the China decided to enter into the 4-point agreement with Japan because China’s strategy to isolate Japan failed due to strong U.S. backing of Japan.
 - The other role the United States can play is, of course, that of mediator.
 - But since the most of the strategic interests of the United States overlap with that of Japan, there is actually little room in which the United States can maneuver. The only area where it can play an effective and functional role is probably issues of history.

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