

## The quiet change of Japan's policy

Written by Masahiro Matsumura  
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In the shadow of the seemingly waning global Pax Americana and a would-be regional Pax Sinica, now acutely complicated by the ongoing North Korean crisis, Japan has recently taken some low-profile yet significant initiatives in its Taiwan policy.

Without careful reading, these initiatives appear mutually unconnected, but they in fact reflect Tokyo's major strategic recalculation under growing uncertainty in the regional security environment.

Effective from Jan. 1, the Japanese government renamed its unofficial representative organ, the Inter-Exchange Foundation, as the Japan-Taiwan Exchange Association.

However, Taiwan followed suit only on May 17, five-and-a-half months later, renaming its counterpart organ from the East Asia Relations Commission to the Taiwan-Japan Relations Association.

The circumstances signify that Tokyo took a unilateral and, probably, abrupt move toward policy reorientation.

It has to be remembered that, upon diplomatic derecognition in 1972, both sides agreed to set up their respective organs to continue and manage commercial, tourism and other relations, but without concurring on a naming convention.

Tokyo liked to use the term "Taiwan" to be consistent with derecognition, while Taipei insisted on the term "China" as a part of the state's official name.

Evidently, Tokyo took initiatives to discontinue its compromise it had held to for more than four decades.

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On March 25, the administration of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe dispatched the Japanese senior vice minister for public management, home affairs, posts and telecommunications to attend this year's Japan Fair sponsored by its representative organ.

The vice minister stressed the significance of close bilateral relations and the growing partnership between the two nations, although his public statement might be excused as a gesture out of courtesy.

He was the highest-ranking government official to make a formal visit to Taiwan since derecognition.

Until 2006, Tokyo stringently limited those it sent to Taiwan to the rank of ministry directors. That year it relaxed the restriction somewhat to allow director-generals to visit. The restraint aimed to avoid unnecessarily antagonizing Beijing by denying the statehood of the Republic of China.

Evidently, the dispatch signaled a noticeable relative decline of the Beijing factor in Tokyo's considerations, although it does not cover national security policy areas due to the lack of a domestic legal authorization similar to the Taiwan Relations Act.

As expected, on March 27, a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs deputy spokeswoman made a statement protesting the dispatch at a news conference.

On June 26, Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga, who is also the Cabinet spokesman, told a news conference at the Office of the Prime Minister in Tokyo that he welcomed Taiwan to participate in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

In December last year, Japan ratified the TPP, despite then-US president-elect Donald Trump's firm commitment to withdraw from the free-trade agreement. Since the actual pullout in January, Japan has played a leading role among the 11 signatories to bring it into effect.

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It has to be noted that Japan's underlying strategic rationale in the continuing pursuit of the TPP has shifted.

In the context of the US-China geoeconomic rivalry, Tokyo bandwagoned on the TPP as then-US president Barak Obama's offensive against China's promotion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which excludes the US. With the US pullout from the TPP, this position is no longer tenable, even though Tokyo still officially would welcome the US back to the agreement, which would buttress the geoeconomic base for its continued reliance on the US as its sole security guarantor.

However, given that a US return is highly unlikely, the 11 TPP nations will more likely result in the formation of a geoeconomic league of small and medium-sized powers, with some western Pacific maritime nations at the core and Japan as the largest economy.

As a matter of course, Tokyo seeks to hedge against the advent of a regional Pax Sinica in the event of a US strategic withdrawal to areas west of Hawaii.

This scenario would be a nightmare for Tokyo, but cannot be totally excluded due to Trump's anti-globalist "America First" line involving major downsizing and restructuring of military power.

Thus, Tokyo can only seek smooth progression of the geoeconomic league, if necessary, to be a Japan-led security entente that might serve as a strategically independent buffer between the US and China in the area between what Beijing names the first and the second island chains.

If the situation worsens, Taiwan, Australia, the Philippines and Indonesia would be indispensable.

A strategic vision after hegemony looms on the horizon, even for Japanese strategic thinkers.

They still highly value the alliance with the US and are not at all prepared to challenge China

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outright by recognizing Taiwan's de jure independence.

Notwithstanding, Tokyo has already taken preliminary measures without crossing Beijing's or Washington's red lines. Soliciting Taipei to participate in the TPP and keeping the door open for a US comeback is a well-calibrated move. Now Taipei has a golden opportunity to make a difference to an uncharted future.

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