

Trilateral Cooperation: Countermeasures Deployed by CJK Countries During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic

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One of the most fragile triangular relationships in the world is that between three countries in East Asia, namely China, Japan and the Republic of Korea (CJK). This relationship currently faces significant challenges, and the opportunity for relations between China and Japan in particular to improve has been lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Sino-Japanese relations were in the process of recovering after the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands crisis of 2012. Prime Minister Abe expected Xi Jinping's state visit to Japan to improve the relations between these two countries.

However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic completely destroyed that hope, and Sino-Japanese relations have been further challenged by the following events: the formation of a "new Cold War" between China and the U.S., the problems of Hong Kong and Xinjiang, and the revival of the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue.

Ideally, China and Japan, as well as China and the Republic of Korea, should have interacted and cooperated in their collective efforts to control the pandemic. However, in reality, there has instead been a revival of longstanding conflict and an emergence of a new kind of conflict.

In this paper, I will demonstrate how the COVID-19 pandemic has damaged the chances of improving the relations between China and Japan, and how the old and new confrontations occurring in the CJK relationship constitute the formation of a "new Cold War."

1. Lost opportunity for significant improvements in Sino-Japanese relations

i. Sino-Japanese relations in a process of recovery

Although relations have historically been strained, Sino-Japanese relations had been recovering in recent years.

In October 2018, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo hailed his high-profile visit to Beijing an historic turning point. This was the first visit to China by a Japanese prime minister in nearly seven years, excluding attendance at multilateral meetings¹. During his visit to Beijing, Abe said Japan was China's 'partner,' and no longer its aid donor².

At the same time, Prime Minister Abe once again stated that he would welcome President Xi's visit to Japan the next year. President Xi expressed gratitude and responded that he would consider the invitation seriously. In addition, Prime Minister Abe stated that he looked forward to returning to China for the Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit to be held in China the next year³.

In June 2019, Prime Minister Abe and President Xi met on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Japan. This was the first official visit Xi had made to Japan since becoming president in 2013. At the outset of their talks, Prime Minister Abe invited him to return to Japan on a state visit the next year. "Around the time of the cherry blossoms next spring, I would like to welcome President Xi as a state guest to Japan," he said. He also said that he hoped to further improve ties between the two countries⁴.

On December 24, 2019, the Eighth Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit meeting was held in Chengdu. Prime Minister Abe and President of the Republic of Korea, Moon Jae-in, visited China to attend. This Summit was

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Prime Minister Abe Visits China," October 26, 2018. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page3e_000958.html.

² Steven Lee Myers and Motoko Rich, "Shinzo Abe said Japan is China's 'partner,' and no longer its aid donor," *The New York Times*, October 26, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/26/world/asia/shinzo-abe-china-japan.html>.

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Prime Minister Abe Visits China."

⁴ BBC News, "Japan's Abe and China's Xi Jinping meet amid trade war fears," June 27, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48782245>.

held on the 20th anniversary of the commencement of Japan-China-ROK cooperation. The three leaders reviewed the trilateral cooperation over the past two decades and discussed the direction of trilateral cooperation for the next decade. The leaders exchanged their views regarding regional and international affairs, including the issue of North Korea⁵.

It is also important that Prime Minister Abe held a summit meeting with President Xi in Beijing on December 23, 2019, one day before the Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit, where Prime Minister Abe told President Xi, “I attach extreme importance to your state visit to Japan next spring, which will mark an important milestone in Japan-China relations”. He also said “preparations will be made in cooperation with each other to ensure that your state visit to Japan is meaningful and to build up a bilateral relationship that is suitable for the ‘new era of Japan-China relations’.”⁶

Clearly, Prime Minister Abe hoped that President Xi’s state visit would take place; there is little doubt that economically Japan needs China’s market. In addition, President Xi also agreed to work together with Japan to elevate bilateral relations to a new level⁷, and hoped Japan and China would “pave open a new future, with political traction gaining through bilateral communication”. The two leaders shared their commitment to continuing to work together to ensure a smooth and meaningful state visit to Japan by President Xi next spring⁸. We can see that tensions with Washington over its protectionist trade policy had driven Japan and China into an unlikely friendship⁹.

However, the recovery process in Sino-Japanese relations did not last long. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak completely undermined this hope of recovery.

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “The Eighth Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit,” December 24, 2019. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/rp/page3e_001141.html.

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Japan-China Summit Meeting and Dinner,” December 23, 2019. https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page3e_001144.html.

⁷ The Japan Times News, “Abe and Xi agree to work to elevate Japan-China ties to new level,” December 23, 2019.

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/12/23/national/politics-diplomacy/abe-heads-china-trilateral-summit-focus-falls-meeting-moon/#.Xzai6C2KXaY>.

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Japan-China Summit Meeting and Dinner.”

⁹ BBC News, “Japan's Abe and China's Xi Jinping meet amid trade war fears,” June 27, 2019.

- ii. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on Sino-Japanese relations

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world. By mid-August 2020, more than 700,000 people had died of COVID-19.

The pandemic has also resulted in significant damage to international relations. In March 2020, U.S. President Trump and a Chinese spokesperson debated the origin of the coronavirus. In a strongly worded tweet written in English on his verified account, Foreign Ministry of China spokesperson Zhao Lijian said “it might be the U.S. army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan¹⁰.”

The Chinese Communist Party has adopted aggressive disinformation tactics (much like Russia’s tactics) toward the U.S. since the pandemic crisis began ¹¹. U.S. President Donald Trump did not overlook the Chinese spokesperson’s tweet, and called the coronavirus the “Chinese virus,” claiming that he was using the term because China had tried to blame the virus on U.S. soldiers¹².

On this point, Japan did not stand on President Trump’s side. As far as the author can tell, Japanese people do not usually use the term “Chinese virus.” In the early days of the pandemic, the term “Wuhan pneumonia” was used simply because Japanese people learned of this pandemic via the news coming out of Wuhan. This was not intended to be disrespectful or to connote racial nuance at all, and the terms “new pneumonia” (新型肺炎) or “new coronavirus” (新型コロナウイルス) are more commonly used now.

Although Japan is an ally of the U.S., Japanese society did not follow the U.S. president’s lead on this point. It is important to note that initially the government and society of Japan basically maintained silence when it came to claiming China's culpability for the pandemic.

However, the outbreak of COVID-19 has certainly had a deep impact on

¹⁰ Lijian Zhao’s Tweet, March 12, 2019.

<https://twitter.com/zlj517/status/1238111898828066823?lang=en>.

¹¹ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “China takes a page from Russia’s disinformation playbook,” *Axios*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/coronavirus-china-russia-disinformation-playbook-c49b6f3b-2a9a-47c1-9065-240121c9ceb2.html>.

¹² Maegan Vazquez & Betsy Klein, “Trump again defends use of the term ‘China virus,’” *CNN*, March 19, 2019. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/17/politics/trump-china-coronavirus/index.html>.

Sino-Japanese relations. As mentioned above, Prime Minister Abe was hoping to host Chinese leader Xi Jinping's scheduled spring 2020 state visit to Japan, but the pandemic made his visit impossible. The Japanese government announced that President Xi's state visit had been postponed on March 5, but the associated decision-making process for this became a problem.

On the same day that the Japanese government officially announced Xi Jinping's state visit had been postponed due to COVID-19, the Japanese government finally announced the suspension of travel visas for travelers from China, and requested that people arriving from the Republic of Korea and China be quarantined for two weeks at designated facilities in Japan¹³.

After the outbreak of COVID-19, Japan was open for visitors from China, and many tourists arrived in Japan during and after the Lunar New Year period. As a result, the government came under fire for not dealing with the pandemic swiftly enough. Japan's Jiji Press reported that the Chinese government asked Japan "not to make a big deal [out of COVID-19]," which resulted in Japan's slow response¹⁴.

Japanese society suspected that it was because of the plan for President Xi to make a state visit to Japan that the Japanese government did not decide to request quarantine of arrivals to the country. Conservative voices particularly criticized Prime Minister Abe's excessive consideration of China's wishes during this time. As his support base is conservative, Prime Minister Abe soon lost his enthusiasm for Chinese President Xi's state visit to Japan.

This was a damaging episode not only for the Abe administration, but also for the whole of Sino-Japanese relations. Nevertheless, this was only a preface to the further deterioration of relations that was to follow.

¹³ Kyodo News, "China's Xi Jinping postpones state visit to Japan due to coronavirus," *The Japan Times*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/03/05/national/chinas-xi-jinping-postpones-japan-visit-covid-19/#.XmP0d-C2ZPMI>; and "Japan to restrict travel to and from China, S. Korea over virus," Kyodo News, March 6, 2020, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/03/9a7d275e6a90-japans-coronavirus-bill-likely-to-clear-lower-house-on-march-12.html>

¹⁴ "Seifu, Hirogaru Hihan ni Aseri 'Mizugiwa de Shippai', Shijiritsu ni Kage – Shingata Haien [Government impatience with growing criticism, 'Failure at boarder measures', Impacting approval rate – Coronavirus]," Jiji Press, February 19, 2020, <https://www.jiji.com/jc/article?k=2020021800962&g=pol>.

iii. “Mask diplomacy” and the lost opportunity for rapprochement between China and Japan

After the outbreak of COVID-19, China strengthened its so-called “mask diplomacy” around the world, which has stimulated discussions and debates. By shipping medical supplies to European countries, China was “seeking to boost its image as a responsible global leader”¹⁵. From the viewpoint of an American thinktank, China’s “mask diplomacy” was a “charm offensive” to try to make the world forget Beijing’s culpability in the coronavirus crisis”¹⁶.

When it comes to relations between China and Japan, it is important that these two countries provide medical supplies to each other. In January 2020, Japanese citizens, including members of parliament, made personal donations to help fight the outbreak in China’s Hubei Province. The members of Japan’s ruling Liberal Democratic Party voted to donate 5,000 yen (around \$45) each from their monthly salaries — totaling 2 million yen or U.S. \$18,170 — to help fight the outbreak in China¹⁷.

The Japanese government built on these efforts by sending thousands of pieces of protective equipment to Wuhan, while the residents of Oita prefecture — the Japanese sister city of Wuhan — also gifted 30,000 masks to the epicenter of the coronavirus. Simultaneously, the Japanese company Ito-Yokado donated over a million masks to China, while other corporations including Maeda Construction, Air Water, and MUJI provided protective supplies¹⁸.

Movingly, the Japan Youth Development Association dispatched boxes of masks and thermometers emblazoned with an eight-Kanji character piece that read: “Mountain, River, Different, Areas/Wind, Moon, Same, Sky” (Even

¹⁵ Brian Wong, “China’s Mask Diplomacy,” *The Diplomat*, March 25, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/chinas-mask-diplomacy/>

¹⁶ Jeffery W. Hornung, “Don’t Be Fooled by China’s Mask Diplomacy,” *The Rand Blog*, May 5, 2020. <https://www.rand.org/blog/2020/05/dont-be-fooled-by-chinas-mask-diplomacy.html>

¹⁷ Cheng Li and Ryan McElveen, “Mask diplomacy: How coronavirus upended generations of China-Japan antagonism,” *Brookings*, March 9, 2020. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/09/mask-diplomacy-how-coronavirus-upended-generations-of-china-japan-antagonism/amp/?__twitter_impression=true

¹⁸ Ibid.

though we live in different places, we live under the same sky) (山川異域 風月同天). The passage is said to be a Chinese poem that Japan's Emperor Tenmu's grandson Prince Nagaya (684?-729) sent to the Tang Dynasty's high monk Ganjin (Jianzhen) (688-763) about 1,300 years ago¹⁹.

Tokyo's Matsuyama Ballet company was filmed singing the Chinese national anthem on stage and cheering on its Chinese viewers from afar²⁰. In a certain respect, the COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity for rapprochement between China and Japan²¹.

On the other hand, China also provided Japan with medical supplies. However, the effect of China's "mask diplomacy" was more limited than the "mask diplomacy" undertaken by Japan. One reason is that the Japanese TV news often reported that a shortage of masks was caused by the buying up of masks by Chinese tourists in late January or during the Lunar New Year period²².

Of course, not only visitors from mainland Chinese but also those from Hong Kong or Taiwan bought many masks in Tokyo and other cities in Japan. However, according to the Chinese government, Hong Kong and Taiwan are part of China, so most mass media just pointed out a mask "shopping spree" (爆買い) by "Chinese people" in the broad sense.

Such reports led to growing demands for Chinese citizens' entry into the country to be restricted and resulted in the implementation of this decision on March 5, although the government still came under fire for not dealing with the problem swiftly enough.

On the one hand, "mask diplomacy" was a chance for rapprochement between China and Japan. Chinese media reported the beautiful story of

¹⁹ Yoshikazu Hirai, "China touched by poem written on aid packages sent from Japan," *The Asahi Shimbun*, February 13, 2020. <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13124309>

²⁰ Xinhua net, "Japan's Matsuyama Ballet Troupe cheer China up with Chinese slogans and national anthem," February 13, 2020. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/13/c_138780719.htm

²¹ Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, "Coronavirus an unexpected boost for diplomacy." <https://www.asiapacific.ca/asia-watch/coronavirus-unexpected-boost-diplomacy>

²² For example: Ayako Sakaguchi, Ayako Honda & Hirono Shiranami, "Bakugai' de masuku ga shinausu, chugokujin kankokyaku ga hasso? Shingata haien kakudai," *Nishi nihon Shimbun*, January 30, 2020. <https://www.nishinippon.co.jp/item/n/579781/>

“mask diplomacy” more often than Japanese media did. On the other hand, Japanese media did not publicize this point enough. For example, the case of Tokyo’s Matsuyama Ballet singing the Chinese national anthem is little known in Japan. Here we can see that Japanese media had started to gradually move away from supporting Prime Minister Abe’s policy goal of realizing President Xi’s state visit to Japan as early as in January.

Japanese media withdrew this support after stepping up criticism of the government. In mid-February, questions were raised about the handling of the Diamond Princess cruise ship²³. Japan’s health minister Kato appointed by Prime Minister Abe could not successfully contain the virus on the ship, and the whole quarantine policy of the government was criticized heavily. As previously mentioned, Japan still admitted entry into the country by visitors from China who were not traveling from Hubei Province, and this was also criticized. Therefore, Japanese society strongly questioned the attitude of the government toward China.

At the same time, the news of Dr. Li Wenliang’s death shocked Japanese society. Dr. Li was a 34-year-old ophthalmologist who worked at a hospital in Wuhan. In December 2019, he sent a message to fellow doctors warning of seven cases of pneumonia that looked like SARS. A few days later, he was investigated along with eight other doctors for "spreading rumors." Soon after this, Dr. Li contracted coronavirus from a patient and shared his experience of the virus on social media before he died in February. His death triggered a wave of public anger toward the Chinese government over its handling of the outbreak, with accusations that it initially tried to keep it secret²⁴. After an investigation, Chinese authorities apologized to Dr. Li's family and admitted to "shortcomings and deficiencies" in their response²⁵. This prompted people outside of China to question whether it was correct to cooperate with the Chinese government given it is an authoritarian regime that disregards

²³ Satoshi Oshima & Satoshi Yamamoto, “Questions raised about handling of Diamond Princess quarantine,” *NHK*, February 20, 2020.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/li-wenliang-dead-coronavirus-whistleblower-doctor-death-public-reaction-wuhan-a9323396.html>

²⁴ Peter Stubley, “Death of Chinese doctor who warned about coronavirus sparks outpouring of anger,” *Independent*, February 7, 2020.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/li-wenliang-dead-coronavirus-whistleblower-doctor-death-public-reaction-wuhan-a9323396.html>

²⁵ BBC News, “Li Wenliang: Coronavirus death of Wuhan doctor sparks anger,” February 7, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51409801>.

human rights. Japan was no exception.

Japanese people deeply sympathized with the people of Wuhan, including Li Wenliang and Fang Fang, an award-winning Chinese author, whose diary documenting her life in Wuhan in the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak has now been translated into English and Japanese (the Japanese translation will be published in Japan in September). This sympathy for the plight of Wuhan people is why Japanese citizens shipped medical equipment to Wuhan and enthusiastically cooperated with ordinary Chinese people. At the same time, they questioned whether the authoritarian Chinese government was worth cooperating with because an investigation into Dr. Li's actions such as took place in China would have been out of the question in liberal-democratic countries. This kind of problem consciousness also relates to the Hong Kong and Xinjiang problems, as described below.

2. Old and new confrontations between CJK

- i. The formation of a “new Cold War” between China and the U.S. and criticisms of “pro-China” leaders

On January 15, only one week before the Chinese government announced cancelling outgoing flights and trains from Wuhan and suspending public transportation in Wuhan, U.S. President Trump declared that "our relationship with China is the best it's ever been." It seemed the U.S. and China had avoided a quick descent into a new Cold War.

But this period of the relationship did not last long. After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, President Trump started calling the coronavirus the “Chinese virus” in March, and in this way escalated the tension between China and the U.S. A “new Cold War” was playing out across the world, and this so-called “new Cold War” structure was gradually impacting the CJK relationship as well.

The most symbolic event in the process of the formation of a “new Cold War” structure in East Asia was the Hong Kong problem, while the most important event in the formation of a “new Cold War” structure in Sino-Japanese relations was the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands question, as described below. In addition, criticisms of “pro-China” leaders of Japan's ruling Liberal

Democratic Party (LDP) was also related to the formation of a “new Cold War” structure.

The LDP’s Nikai faction (named after the LDP Secretary-General Toshihiro Nikai of Wakayama Prefecture) is the LDP’s pro-China group. Nikai and other “pro-China” politicians, including Tsukasa Akimoto, who has been caught up in a corruption scandal related to dealing with Chinese companies, have been repeatedly criticized in the Japanese domestic context, and a U.S. thinktank has also recently started to level criticisms at them. According to a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), “this group is also referred to as the ‘Nikai-Imai faction²⁶.’” The author of the report, Devin Stewart writes that “Takaya Imai, a senior adviser to Abe and former METI bureaucrat, has persuaded the prime minister to take a softer approach toward China and its infrastructure projects on business grounds. Nikai, who has brought five pandas from China to a zoo in his hometown Wakayama, served as the prime minister’s special envoy to China to meet Xi Jinping in April 2019 and advocated for Japan’s cooperation on the BRI, regardless of the United States’ opinion²⁷.”

Needless to say, this report by CSIS encouraged critics of pro-China politicians. For instance, *Sankei Shimbun*, one of the biggest “conservative” newspapers in Japan, covered this report analyzing the “Nikai-Imai faction²⁸.” The influence of this report was significant in Japan, and made it more difficult for Prime Minister Abe to pursue the improvement of Sino-Japanese relations by hosting President Xi’s state visit to Japan in the near future.

ii. The influence of the Hong Kong and Xinjiang problems

In the process of the formation of a “new Cold War” structure between China and the U.S., Japan has also paid more attention to the Hong Kong and Xinjiang problems.

On June 30, 2020, China’s top legislature, the National People's Congress,

²⁶ Devin Stewart, “China’s Influence in Japan: Everywhere Yet Nowhere in Particular,” *CSIS*, July, 2020. p. 16.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 16.

²⁸ Yoshihisa Komori, “Bei yuryoku kenkyuzho ga Abe shusho sokkin wo ‘taichu yuwa ha’ to nazashi,” *Sankei Shimbun*, July 27, 2020.

<https://www.sankei.com/world/news/200727/wor2007270014-n1.html>.

passed a new national security law for Hong Kong. On the same day, Chief Cabinet Secretary of the Japanese government Yoshihide Suga, speaking at a regular news briefing, called the move “regrettable,” noting that it had come in the face of “strong concerns from the international community and citizens of Hong Kong.”

Asked about the law the same day, Defense Minister Taro Kono, a future contender for prime minister, told a news conference that the move could have grave implications for a planned state visit by President Xi. “If (the news of the security law passage) is true, I can’t help but say it will have a significant impact on Chairman Xi’s planned state visit,” Kono said²⁹.

Following the enactment of the national security law, Agnes Chow Ting, a 23-year-old pro-democracy politician, was arrested again on August 10, 2020, reportedly on charges of violating the national security law. Chow is a former member of Demosistō, a political party founded by prominent activist Joshua Wong that was disbanded shortly after the security law came into force³⁰. Agnes Chow speaks fluent Japanese and has been dubbed the “goddess of democracy” by Japanese media. Chow has also been appointed a research fellow at the graduate school of Hokkaido University³¹.

In Japan, she is so popular that politicians and the public have shown their staunch support for her, with #FreeAgnes trending on social media and a cross-party group of Diet members condemning her arrest³². Some LDP members attempted to adopt a party resolution requesting that Chinese President Xi not be allowed to visit Japan as a state guest. Unsurprisingly, a

²⁹ Jesse Johnson & Satoshi Sugiyama, “Tokyo toughens tone after Beijing passes Hong Kong security law,” *The Japan Times*, June 30, 2020,

<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/06/30/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-delivers-toughest-words-yet-china-hong-kong-security-law/#.Xzotri3APaY>.

³⁰ James Griffiths, “Hong Kong’s new security law is transforming the city even faster than expected,” *CNN*, August 11, 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/11/asia/hong-kong-security-law-intl-hnk/index.html>

³¹ Kenji Kawase, “Hong Kong’s Agnes Chow defies travel ban in Skype appeal to Japan,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, January 17, 2020.

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Hong-Kong-protests/Hong-Kong-s-Agnes-Chow-defies-travel-ban-in-Skype-appeal-to-Japan>

³² Julian Ryall, “As #FreeAgnes trends in Japan, why is Hong Kong activist Agnes Chow so popular there?” *South China Morning Post*, August 12, 2020.

https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3097132/freeagnes-trends-japan-why-hong-kong-activist-agnes-chow-so?utm_source=Facebook&utm_medium=share_widget&utm_campaign=3097132&fbclid=IwAR3IKqr1taF_EFJJXG4Wz0M2k8n3Mk93fy0kSxYFa-MCJmWdJOYH2GIQV9g

party faction led by Nikai opposed the move and the resolution was not taken as a consensus of the LDP³³. However, this pro-China position has recently been criticized heavily in Japanese society.

China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said "no external forces are allowed to interfere" in Hong Kong," and "we urge Japan to recognize the reality, understand the issue correctly, and stop interfering in China's internal affairs³⁴." This hostile comment was not taken well by Japanese society, and resulted in Japanese people more clearly labelling the Chinese government as an enemy of democracy threatening Agnes Chow, who is seen by Japanese people as just an ordinary girl.

The Xinjiang problem has also been discussed more widely in Japanese media since 2017, whereas reports that conform to Chinese propaganda have been few. Needless to say, "conservative" newspapers that also report on Tibet and the Tiananmen Incident have discussed the Xinjiang problem without any consideration of what China's reaction might be. However, even originally pro-China mass media such as Asahi Shimbun has recently reported in detail on China's policies of "IUDs, abortion, sterilization" of ethnic minorities who live in Xinjiang³⁵, whereas such media was previously limited in its reporting of negative news related to China.

Japanese society knows that the Chinese authorities have continued its "violating rule" even after the outbreak of COVID-19. In August 2020, a BBC article about a video of Merdan Ghappar, a model for the massive Chinese online retailer Taobao, was translated into Japanese along with a number of accompanying text messages he had sent. People now knew new details about the huge psychological pressure placed on Uyghur communities, including from a document he photographed which calls on children as young as 13 to "repent and surrender³⁶."

³³ Narumi Ota, "Japan eyes bill to sanction human rights abuses in Hong Kong," *The Asahi Shimbun*, July 30, 2020. <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13591720>

³⁴ Jesse Johnson & Satoshi Sugiyama, "Japan sticks to well-worn diplomatic language after latest Hong Kong crackdown," *The Japan Times*, August 11, 2020. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/08/11/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-hong-kong-china-arrests/#.XzPnsy2KXaY>

³⁵ The Asahi Shimbun, "China cuts Uighur births with IUDs, abortion, sterilization," June 30, 2020. <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13502568>

³⁶ John Sudworth, "China Uighurs: A model's video gives a rare glimpse inside internment," *BBC*, August 4, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-53650246>; BBC News "Uiguru zoku no moderu, chugoku no shuyo shisetsu kara dogo: BBC ga nyushu," August 5, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/japanese/features-and-analysis->

China's propaganda is not considered favorably in Japan. Sympathy for Uyghur and Hong Kong people suffering under China's "violating rule" has been constantly strengthened by daily news.

Of course, China is very important to Japan's economy. However, Japanese companies have started worrying whether their economic activities in China may be accused by the international community of using forced labor from ethnic minorities. According to a report released by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), several famous Japanese and western companies have supply chains that include Chinese companies that use forced Uyghur forced labor³⁷.

As Hong Kong has now also lost its favored trade status, there has recently been a great deal of bad news and new risks for Japanese businesspeople seeking to deal with China.

iii. Revival of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands question

When it comes to cooperation between CJK since the beginning of the pandemic, several territorial disputes have been obstructive factors. The most significant of these in the "new Cold War" structure could be argued to be the South China sea, while the East China sea (i.e. the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands question) could be the most powerful and direct factor pushing Japan into closer alliance with the U.S. camp. This issue is directly related not only to the national security of Japan, but also to the Japan-U.S. alliance.

This year (2020), Chinese patrol ships have been present outside Japan's "territorial waters" since April 14, for more than 100 straight days at the time of writing, which is the longest period since 2012. On August 4, Defense Minister Taro Kono at a news conference said "the Self-Defense Force will act firmly when necessary while joining hands with the Japan Coast Guard³⁸."

On July 29, Lieutenant General Kevin Schneider, Commander of U.S. Forces Japan, told reporters in a video briefing that "the United States is 100

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³⁷ Vicky Xiuzhong Xu, Danielle Cave, James Leibold, Kelsey Munro & Nathan Ruser, "Uyghurs for Sale," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, March 1, 2020. <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uyghurs-sale>

³⁸ The Asahi Shimbun, "Kono tells China SDF will respond to intrusions around Senkakus," August 5, 2020. <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13609256>

percent, absolutely steadfast in its commitment to help the government of Japan with the situation in the Senkakus.” He used the Japanese term for the group of disputed islands that are called Diaoyu in China. “That is 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, seven days a week³⁹.”

It is obvious that Japan and the U.S. have strengthened their cooperation on territorial issues in the East China Sea, which has the effect of consolidating Japan’s position in the U.S. camp and the strength of the Japan-U.S. alliance in the “new Cold War” structure.

Conclusion

Countries around the world in the post-COVID-19 era may be divided into two types: one type is increasingly turning away from China and the other type is becoming more dependent on China. These two types could also be characterized as the two camps of a “new Cold War” structure.

Under such circumstances, how should Japan and the Republic of Korea face China, and how should China face Japan and the Republic of Korea? China is an important partner, both economically and geographically, for Japan and South Korea and vice versa. The deterioration of relations between CJK does not benefit any country.

It goes without saying that cooperation is always more welcome than confrontation. However, the reality we face includes the revival of longstanding conflict and the emergence of a new kind of conflict.

On the one hand, from the viewpoint of Japan, whether or not China’s authoritarian regime is worth cooperating with has been questioned since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in January 2020. There have been many new obstructive factors this year alone: the investigation of Dr. Li Wenliang and Fang Fang in Wuhan, Agnes Chow’s meaningless arrest in Hong Kong, the inhumane treatment of detained Uyghur people, and the revival of the Senkaku/Diaoyu question.

On the other hand, from the viewpoint of China, whether or not the Japanese government is worth cooperating with may also be questioned if

³⁹ Isabel Reynolds, “U.S. Forces’ Chief Pledges to Help Japan With Chinese Ships,” *Bloomberg*, July 29, 2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-29/u-s-forces-chief-pledges-to-help-japan-with-chinese-ships>

China starts revisiting so-called “historical problems” such as the textbook controversy, lack of recognition of historical events, and politicians’ worshipping at the Yasukuni Shrine. However, China has so far not focused on these issues.

As mentioned above, the COVID-19 pandemic has damaged the chance of greatly improving the relationship between China and Japan. “Mask diplomacy” seemed promising at the beginning of the pandemic, but it was unfortunate that the Japanese government could not successfully handle quarantine at that time, causing the Japanese mass media to step up criticism of the Japanese government in February. It is also regrettable that a “new Cold War” between China and the U.S. has divided Japan and China, and that Japanese society is increasingly recognizing China as an enemy of democracy due to the Hong Kong and Xinjiang problems.

There are old and new risks to trilateral cooperation between CJK countries posed by the “new Cold War” dynamic between China and the U.S. Until the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the world is likely to remain in a wait-and-see state. CJK countries should seek to de-escalate conflict and defuse tension. Trilateral cooperation between CJK countries will be a mediator between China and the U.S. in a “new Cold War” structure.