

TPP's Significance for Counter-China Strategy

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At a meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama in Hawaii on November 12, Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda came up with his plan to start consultations with relevant countries on Japan's participation in negotiations on a Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade agreement. Noda's decision on the TPP talks is in a right direction, though falling short of making up for misgovernment by his two benighted predecessors Yukio Hatoyama and Naoto Kan under the rule of the Democratic Party of Japan.

Anti-American sentiment

TPP-related arguments in Japan are roughly divided into three categories. The first category covers emotional anti-TPP arguments. Behind this category is anti-American sentiment that has been deep-rooted among some Japanese. Even apart from such sentiment, people who are critical of the ruling DPJ have emotionally reacted to then Prime Minister Kan's sudden proposal last year for considering Japan's possible participation in the TPP talks. They then awfully argued that Japan's agriculture would collapse on its participation in the TPP, that the Japanese economy would increase its dependence on the U.S. economy, and that the TPP could trigger a massive influx of foreigner to affect Japan's traditions, cultures and even language.

The second category of TPP-related arguments, though accepting free-trade principles, is cautious of supporting Japan's participation in TPP negotiations in the absence of sufficient information about the talks as Japan has not taken part in the bargaining. Such arguments by cautious free-trade supporters are relatively reasonable. If details of the TPP negotiations are made available, they may begin to discuss how Japan should deal with tariff reductions for specific products in consideration of its national interests.

Japan and U.S. should check China

The third category endorses Japan's participation in TPP talks in consideration of international trends. This represents the so-called counter-China strategy that has little been cited in Japanese media. The United States' China policy has featured a balance between engagement and hedging, which has been adjusted to situational changes over time. Over the past two years, the United States and China have grown more leery of each other. Prime Minister Noda has chosen to participate in the TPP negotiations in which China has not taken part. At an East Asian summit in Indonesia's

Bali on November 19, Noda and U.S. President Obama may call for the freedom of navigation to check China.

In a sensitive reaction to the U.S. counter-China strategy, China has enhanced campaigns for a 13-nation ASEAN Plus Three free trade agreement covering the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Japan, China and South Korea. In response, Japan has called for a 16-nation ASEAN Plus Three Plus Three FTA covering India, Australia and New Zealand in addition to the 13 ASEAN-Plus-Three members. This is a wise choice.

The U.S. engagement policy aims at keeping China engaged in the international community, as China has been unfamiliar with international community rules. Chinese strategists since Mao Zedong have cautiously viewed the U.S. policy as pursuing a peaceful evolution, or a social overthrow through peaceful means. Japan should ride on the high tide of the counter-China strategy. The problems are whether Prime Minister Noda is conscious of doing so and whether the Liberal Democratic Party, including many anti-TPP lawmakers, understands the whole picture of the global situation.

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