

# The Japan-China Relationship as a Structural Conflict

Written by Zhiqun Zhu

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ZHIQUN ZHU, DEC 31 2013

Much has been said about China's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's recent visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, which escalated tensions between Japan and China. But few realize that the Japan-China conflict is structural in nature.

Historians will remember 2010 as a turning point in East Asia's international relations. In that year, China overtook Japan as the second largest economy in the world, a position Japan had held for nearly 40 years.[1] After a couple of decades of economic stagnation, Japan's heyday as an economic superpower seems to be over. As a result, China and Japan are now facing each other as powers of relatively equal strength for the first time in their long history of interactions. Also in that year, a Chinese fishing boat rammed a Japanese Coast Guard vessel in the disputed East China Sea area, triggering Japan's arrest of the Chinese captain and its reluctant release of him a few weeks later under heavy Chinese pressure.

The already troubled bilateral relationship rapidly deteriorated after the Japanese government attempted to nationalize several disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in 2012.[2] In a classic security dilemma, Japan's efforts to respond to China's perceived assertiveness, such as by enlarging its military budget and beefing up its alliance with the United States, have been met with China's balancing actions, which include increased air and naval patrols of the disputed area and the designation of ADIZ in the East China Sea. China's ADIZ covers the disputed islands and overlaps with that of Japan, which has had its own ADIZ since 1969.

China's move to set up the ADIZ and Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine were viewed by many as destabilizing and provocative.[3] China's growing confidence vis-à-vis Japan's declining willingness to compromise ensures a potentially risky relationship between the two Asian powers. Unresolved historical and territorial disputes add fuel to the fire as a power transition takes place in East Asia. The United States, itself engaged in a long-term and larger-scale power transition with China, strongly defends Japan as an ally.[4] The regional competition between Japan and China coincides with the global competition between China and the United States. America's public support for Japan, including flying B-52s to the disputed East China Sea area despite its repeated avowal of neutrality in the Japan-China disputes,[5] sends confusing messages and can only contribute to the spiral of regional tensions. If managed imprudently, such inherent structural conflicts may spin out of control and lead to actual military clashes in Asia.

### Examining the Japan-China Power Transition

According to the power transition theory in International Relations, when an emerging power and an existing power achieve power parity and one of them is dissatisfied, the power transition will lead to conflict and even war.[6] What makes the Japan-China power transition extremely difficult and dangerous to manage is that both Japan and China are unhappy with the status quo. Japan worries that an increasingly powerful China is challenging the status quo (a state of affairs that Japan prefers).[7] Japan's power has been compromised, but it is not ready to yield to China in Asia's power rivalry. On the other hand, China is displeased because Japan does not recognize China's legitimate interests and refuses to reconcile historical issues.[8]

Adding to the difficulties is Japan's identity crisis; it has yet to come to terms with the fact that the ghost of its

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militarist past is still haunting relations with its neighbors. While Japan has difficulty adjusting to its weakened power status and seriously reflecting upon history, China seems unclear about how to use its growing power to its greatest benefit.

Japan is an extremely proud nation and deservedly so. In history, Japan borrowed and learned a lot from China, whose culture left a permanent mark on Japanese way of life. What is unique about Japan, however, is that it did not just copy; it reinvented and outperformed its master. With its swift victories over China and Russia in the 1894-5 Sino-Japanese War and 1904-5 Russo-Japanese War and its successful industrialization beginning from the second half of the 19th century, Japan quickly propelled to the top rank of powers by the early 20th century. After its surrender at the end of World War II, Japan rapidly regrouped and recovered like a mythical phoenix coming back to life, creating Asia's first economic miracle. In success Japan trusts. However, it seems very difficult for Japan to accept the fact that many Asian countries, including the "four tigers" (being Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan) and China, have quickly caught up in development.

Since Richard Nixon's historic visit to China, every American president has stated that a successful and prosperous China is in the interests of America and American people. Japan, like the United States, has helped China's economic modernization since the late 1970s and it was the first Western power to have lifted economic and trade sanctions against Beijing following the Tiananmen Square tragedy.[9] But Japan has now become less enthusiastic to see a powerful neighbor emerging in Asia. One barely hears Japanese leaders make encouraging public remarks about China's positive developments.

In addition, Japanese politics has become more nationalistic and conservative in recent years. For example, in a very undiplomatic fashion, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe reportedly slammed China recently by calling China an "absurd" country and South Korea a "foolish" country.[10] Most controversially, Abe visited the war-glorifying Yasukuni Shrine on 26 December 2013, in open defiance of China, South Korea and even the United States.[11] Such a sharp political turn makes it hard for those in China to champion improving relations with Japan. Indeed, given the increasing hostility and inflexibility of the Japanese government towards China, a small group of Chinese scholars who used to argue that China should move beyond history and treat Japan as a "normal" country and friendly neighbor may need to reconsider their position.[12]

The Japan-China dispute goes beyond contentious issues such as the territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, the visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, comfort women or the Rape of Nanking; it is about power rivalry and the future power arrangement in East Asia. Since the inherent structural conflict between Japan and China is unlikely to disappear, what can be done to manage the crisis in East Asia?

## Improving Japan-China Relations

The improvement of Japan-China relations requires prudent leadership on both sides. Shinzo Abe and Xi Jinping are strong leaders who are increasingly constrained by growing nationalism at home. Both are apparently attempting to externalize domestic dissatisfaction.[13] As a first step to cool tensions, they must refrain from making provocative remarks about the already tense relationship and encourage their ministers and generals to also remain cool-headed. All parties concerned, including the United States, must agree that diplomacy, not the use or display of force, should be the preferred method to resolve disputes. Neither side should take further unilateral or confrontational actions.

The two countries should focus on common interests, not long-standing disputes. It was such pragmatic policies from both sides that led to the normalization of relations in the early 1970s. Regardless of whether or not Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka and Premier Zhou Enlai agreed to shelve the Senkaku/Diaoyu disputes in 1972 (although apparently today many in Japan believe they did not),[14] the fact of the matter is that probably only the Japanese government thinks there is currently no territorial dispute between Japan and China. China's air and naval patrol of the area surrounding the islands as well as China's designation of an ADIZ represent its stepped-up efforts to challenge Japan's claimed exclusive control of those islands and are designed to compel Japan to return to the negotiation table. Japanese leaders must abandon the 'ostrich' policy that pretends that no dispute exists in the East China Sea. They must also avoid provoking China (and South Korea), by desisting from revisiting the Yasukuni Shrine, for

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example.

Both Japan and China need to take a step back gracefully in order to maintain a stable and friendly relationship. China should clearly reiterate that the establishment of their ADIZ will not impact upon the freedom of navigation and safety of international commercial flights in the disputed area. China should refrain from increasing their military presence in the disputed area. Furthermore, China must be sensitive to Japan's feelings as the power transition (apparently in China's favor) takes place. Japan's GDP has been eclipsed by China's, but Japan remains a major economic power. In many aspects, especially innovation, Japan is still significantly ahead of China. A cooperative relationship with Japan can only benefit China as it continues to modernize. China should therefore remain humble and not punch above its weight.

The two countries should also develop new thinking in dealing with each other. The Western concept of sovereignty is still held dear by both China and Japan. However, we are now living in an interdependent global village. The principle of sovereignty has faced a number of challenges throughout history.[15] Japan and China should have the wisdom to move beyond the sovereignty dispute and develop some mechanism so that both countries will benefit from the resources near the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands through joint explorations. Both nations should be forward-looking and work together to cooperate and bring this dispute to a resolution.

## Concluding Thoughts

Without the cooperation of the United States, neither China nor Japan can achieve their diplomatic objectives. Both China and Japan should welcome the United States to play a more active and constructive role in Asia. The shortest route between Beijing and Tokyo is sometimes via Washington. The United States must balance its interests between a loyal ally and an increasingly interdependent economic partner. It is not in America's interest to contain China; it is equally detrimental to stability in Asia if America's "pivot" towards Asia emboldens Japan to pursue a more hawkish foreign policy. A strong and cooperative relationship between Beijing and Washington holds the key to peace and prosperity in Asia, including the East China Sea.

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[1] BBC, "China overtakes Japan to become world's second economy," *BBC News*, February 14, 2011, accessed December 29, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12445927>.

[2] Jane Perlez, "China Accuses Japan of Stealing After Purchase of Group of Disputed Islands," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2012, accessed December 29, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/12/world/asia/china-accuses-japan-of-stealing-disputed-islands.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/12/world/asia/china-accuses-japan-of-stealing-disputed-islands.html?_r=0).

[3] See for example, James Manicom, "How Washington Bungled China's ADIZ," *Canadian International Council*, November 29, 2013; American Forces Press Service, "Hagel Issues Statement on East China Air Defense Identification Zone," U.S. Department of Defense, November 23, 2013; T. Hirokawa, "Abe Draws China Anger with Visit to Japan's Yasukuni War Shrine," *Bloomberg*, December 26, 2013.

[4] See Peter Symonds, "US Vice President backs Japan over China's air defense zone," *World Socialist Website*, December 4, 2013, accessed December 29, 2013, <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2013/12/04/bide-d04.html>.

[5] Jim Garamone, "Hagel, Onodera Discuss U.S.-Japanese Security Concerns," U.S. Department of Defense, April 29, 2013, accessed December 29, 2013, <http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=119901>.

[6] See A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Alfred A. Knopf, 1968); A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War*

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*Ledger*, (University of Chicago Press, 1981); and Peter Shearman (ed.) *Power Transition and International Order in Asia* (Routledge, 2013).

[7] According to the Japanese government, the Senkaku/Djaoyu islands are under the de facto administrative control of Japan, which is Japan's version of "status quo." China's recent activities including the designation of an ADIZ in the East China Sea pose challenges to such a status quo.

[8] Chico Harlan, "As Japan and China clash, their diplomats see little chance to talk it out," *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2013, accessed December 29, 2013, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-japan-and-china-clash-their-diplomats-see-little-chance-to-talk-it-out/2013/12/06/591da5e0-5da2-11e3-8d24-31c016b976b2\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-japan-and-china-clash-their-diplomats-see-little-chance-to-talk-it-out/2013/12/06/591da5e0-5da2-11e3-8d24-31c016b976b2_story.html).

[9] Among all Western powers that imposed sanctions against China shortly after the June 1989 Tiananmen incident, Japan was the first to lift them as early as July 1990.

[10] Audrey Yoo, "Japan's prime minister calls South Korea a 'foolish country': magazine report," *South China Morning Post*, November 15, 2013, accessed December 29, 2013, <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1356574/japans-prime-minister-calls-south-korea-foolish-country>.

[11] See "Japan PM Abe's Yasukuni visit to 'exacerbate tensions': US embassy," *Straits Times (Singapore)*, December 26, 2013, accessed December 29, 2013, <http://www.straitstimes.com/breaking-news/asia/story/japan-pm-abes-yasukuni-visit-exacerbate-tensions-us-embassy-20131226>.

[12] See Jianwei Wang, "Chinese Discourse on Japan as a 'Normal Country'" in Yoshihide Soeya, David A. Welch and Masayaki Tadokoro (eds.) *Japan as a 'Normal Country?' A Nation in Search of Its Place in the World* (University of Toronto Press, 2011): pp. 121-144.

[13] Growing nationalism and other domestic factors have made the relationships even more difficult to manage. Japan's lackluster economic recovery and China's many challenges such as a widening income gap and a worsening environment have led to strong foreign policies by their leaders, who cannot afford to appear weak at home.

[14] Asahi Shimbun, "NORMALIZATION OF RELATIONS: China claims it agreed with Japan to shelve the dispute in 1972, Japan denies," *The Asahi Shimbun*, December 26, 2012, accessed December 29, 2013, [http://ajw.asahi.com/article/special/senkaku\\_history/AJ201212260103](http://ajw.asahi.com/article/special/senkaku_history/AJ201212260103).

[15] Under the Westphalian system of international order, each nation is understood to be sovereign and its borders inviolate. With the emergence of global problems and the increasing interdependence of nations, it is clear that what happens in one country can have serious repercussions elsewhere. For a discussion of how international developments have challenged the concept of sovereignty, see for example, *Beyond Westphalia? National Sovereignty and International Intervention*, edited by Gene M. Lyons and Michael Mastanduno (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

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