

Historical Animosity: One of Many Sources of Sino–Japanese Tensions Today

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Historical Animosity: Just One of a Variety of Sources Behind Sino–Japanese Tensions Today

A shared history of power imbalance, imperialism, and conflict continues to plague any possibility of positive Sino–Japanese relations today. In particular, China’s dissatisfaction with Japanese apologies for wartime atrocities and the continued Japanese disregard for Chinese wartime sensitivities has sustained animosity in their relationship. However, whilst historical animosity is certainly a major contributing factor to the tensions between the two East Asian nations, to identify it as the sole reason behind the terse relationship is an oversimplification. Three long-standing problems remain in Sino–Japanese relations today: the historical treatment of the Japanese invasion of China, the disputed sovereign claims to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, and the Taiwan question.[1] These issues are not defined by historical grievances shared between the two nations; instead, an understanding of these disputes will reveal that the primary motivating factor in the build-up of tensions in the Sino–Japanese relationship may ultimately be attributed to strategic practice and objectives. Furthermore, the competition for energy security predates current historical enmity between the two nations, and continues to contribute to tensions in their relationship. Historical animosity in the Sino–Japanese relationship is thus not the sole reason for tensions between the two nations, it merely exacerbates existing tensions.

The most relevant ‘history’ which contributes to tensions in the Sino–Japanese relationship today is the period from 1894 to 1945: from the beginning of the First Sino–Japanese War, to the Japanese’s eventual defeat at the end of World War II.[2] The late 19th century saw Japan shift its focus away from Asia and towards the West, as its economy expanded. Consequently, Japan’s industrial growth demanded more raw materials and markets. This marked the beginning of Japanese imperialist policy, spawning an era of aggression against China in the country’s search for the resources needed to sustain its modernisation.[3] The Japanese occupation of China from 1931 to 1945 is particularly relevant to the contemporary Sino–Japanese relationship. The Second Sino–Japanese War saw eight years of brutal Japanese occupation; the use of biological warfare in Manchuria; forced labourers and mistreated POWs; the ‘rape’ and ‘massacre’ of Nanking; and left more than ten million Chinese dead.[4]

The Importance of Perspective

‘Animosity’ refers to ill-will; hostility; enmity. Thus, the degree of animosity China and Japan feel towards each other that may be attributed to historical factors greatly differs depending on which nation’s perspective one takes. For China, it is evident that its perception of Japan continues to be clouded by memories of war and occupation.[5] As such, historical animosity is a primary source of enmity for China against Japan. In contrast, whilst Japan contends China’s assertions on the sincerity of their apologies, existing Japanese antipathy against China may instead be largely attributed to the growth in China’s coercive diplomacy posing a security threat against Japan (such as the 1995 Taiwan Strait missile exercises and the 1998 conduction of nuclear tests).[6] Growing concern about China’s increasing ability and willingness to project force throughout the region so as to assert its dominance is regarded both with fear and annoyance, with many Japanese viewing China as an international bully.[7] Thus, it is already evident that historical animosity is not the sole reason behind tensions in the Sino–Japanese relationship, particularly from the perspective of Japan.

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Normalisation of Relations

Sino–Japanese relations were officially normalised after the September 29 signing of the 1972 Sino–Japanese Joint Statement.[8] At the time, both China and Japan were substantially weaker than they are now; China had limited economic potential, and Japan had little political influence.[9] As such, although historical tensions existed, the need for cooperation against the Soviet military threat outweighed this.[10] Most, although wary of past relations, were ultimately optimistic about the revitalised relationship.[11] Consequently, interstate relations were focused on fostering trade between the two nations. As a result, the Sino–Japanese relationship in the 1970s, before its eventual breakdown in the next decade, was strong and positive. It is therefore evident that the existence of historical animosity was not a factor strong enough to foster tensions between the two nations at the time.

Differing Treatments of History

Almost any scholastic discussion of contemporary East Asian politics will acknowledge the negative impact which the grievances in the treatment of history has had on the Sino–Japanese relationship. The primary issue in contention for China is the perceived lack of Japanese reconciliation or appropriate apology for wartime atrocities committed during the Second Sino–Japanese War. [12] Firstly, the continued visits by members of the Japanese elite, including the Prime Minister on numerous occasions since 2001, to the Yasukuni Shrine remains one of the most divisive actions in contemporary Sino–Japanese relations.[13] The Yasukuni Shrine honours the war dead, including 14 Class A ‘criminals of war’, convicted for war crimes committed against the Chinese during the Second Sino–Japanese War.[14] Similarly, the ‘Textbook Issue’ demonstrated Japanese whitewashing of the atrocities committed in the war.[15] First arising in 1982, the ‘Textbook Issue’ describes reports of the Japanese government approving of the changing of language in history books to vaguer and less incriminating forms, such as changing “Japan invaded China” to “Japan advanced into China”. [16] Similar reports have arisen in 1986, 2000, and 2005, demonstrating a persistence in the Japanese government’s reluctance to accept complete responsibility for abuses committed against the Chinese.[17]

Although the onus for resolving historical tensions has largely been placed on Japan because of the above, China has not been blameless. The failure of the Communist ideology in rallying public support in the early 1980s saw Beijing shift towards a promotion of nationalism, featuring Japan as the ‘national enemy’.[18] A host of public material, both popularly and officially made, was soon propagated throughout Chinese society, which painted the Japanese culture as ‘barbarian, bellicose, and brutal’.[19] This new state-sponsored ‘public education’ was motivated entirely by domestic political purposes, and was not originally meant to have any effect on China’s external relations.[20] Yet such government propagation of negative images against the Japanese, whilst only intended to unite the nation and promote nationalism, resulted in the proliferation in anti-Japanese sentiment throughout Chinese society.

Such conflict in historical treatments have certainly bled into the political dimension of Sino–Japanese relations. A stark example of this was evident in 2005. In light of the growing possibility of Japan winning its bid for permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council, 22 million Chinese signed Internet petitions in protest, citing Japan’s wartime atrocities and its persistent denial of such abuses as the primary reasons.[21] This, combined with the Japanese Ministry of Education’s approval of a contentious history book that had been previously criticised for sugar-coating the role of the Japanese in the Second Sino–Japanese War one month later, sparked three weeks of massive anti-Japanese protests spanning over 20 provinces.[22] The Chinese government similarly opposed Japanese prospects of ascending to the Security Council.[23]

The Security Dilemma

Although acknowledgement of historical enmity remains vital in understanding the Sino–Japanese relationship, a more traditional strategic approach reveals that the two nations’ past is by no means the sole reason for current tensions in the region. The security dilemma theory was first espoused John Herz, who characterised it as ‘a structural notion in which the self-help attempts of states to look after their security needs tend... to lead to rising insecurity for others, as each interprets its own measures as defensive and measures of others as potentially

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threatening'.[24] The security dilemma theory has its roots in realism; however, it allows for constructivist considerations of factors contributing to mistrust between adversaries, which is particularly relevant for the Sino–Japanese relationship. Since the Cold War, the balance of power in East Asia has seen China and Japan emerge as direct competitors and potential leaders of the region. Structural realists like Waltz argue that power in the international system is a zero-sum game: states seek only relative strength for security.[25] By this argument, the growth of tensions between the two nations is only natural, as they seek regional hegemony for the security of their own interests. Meanwhile, the growth in Chinese nationalism, although perhaps not extremely significant when it comes to the creation of policy in an authoritarian state, has defined and fuelled widespread mistrust between both nations.[26]

The dominance of realist theory in the Sino–Japanese relationship may be demonstrated through the rising trend of historical discourse between the two nations. Although Chinese historical animosity towards the Japanese has been prominent since the 1980s, it was not until the late twentieth century that formal governmental criticisms and requests for the Japanese to fully acknowledge their sins began in earnest.[27] Prior to this, it was much more beneficial for the Chinese to maintain a positive, or at least an amicable relationship with Japan. For example, the years after the Tiananmen Square Massacre boded particularly well for Sino–Japanese relations, not because of genuine goodwill, but because the 1989 Massacre left China sanctioned by many states in the international system, and thus the nation needed Japan to 'manoeuvre through international isolation and access Western countries'.[28] As a result, the Chinese government refrained from repeating previous criticisms against the Japanese during this period for their own self-interest.[29] The perception of Japan had not changed – it was just unwise for China to aggravate tensions with one of their most beneficial relations. Conversely, as the aftermath of Tiananmen began to fade and the value of a strong Sino–Japanese relationship consequently faded with it, Beijing's criticisms resumed.[30] Similarly, the refusal of the Japanese Prime Minister to subscribe to the US's 'Three Noes' on Taiwan – a China-backed policy which essentially rejected any Taiwanese claim to independence – led to Jiang Zemin, the Chinese Premier at the time, to respond with a public scolding of Tokyo for their continued 'failure to atone properly for their past misdeeds'.[31] Thus, this demonstrates the level of conflict over historical interpretation acting not as the reason for tensions, but as a reflection of the state of Sino–Japanese relations, as well as a political tool used for China's self-interest.

In the security dilemma theory, any defensive measures taken by a nation may be perceived as offensive threats to the other in the relationship.[32] Despite being economically interdependent, both China and Japan are extremely wary of each other's power and capabilities as threats to their own stability. Although this shared mistrust may be characterised through arguments of historical animosity – such as China citing Japan's failure to acknowledge its conflict history as a reason against allowing Japanese attainment of force projection capabilities[33] – the tensions embedded in the relationship between Japan and China are ultimately defined by stability and security considerations. This is displayed in the following examples.

The Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands Dispute

The Sino–Japanese dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands is one of the most pressing issues of international security in the contemporary international system. Although the conflicting claims of the two nations are rooted in opposing understandings of the history of the territory, the dispute is ultimately, and indisputably, a strategic struggle.[34] As a maritime nation whose strength comes from its market, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and the respective waterways which comes with territorial sovereignty over the region is of enormous strategic importance for Japan. Notably, sovereignty over the islands will give Japan the rights to the impressive estimates of undersea oil and gas deposits within the islands' delineation.[35] China contends the territory for similar reasons.[36] Additionally, the waterway where the islands lie is the direction from which all threats to China's sovereignty came from in the early 20th century. Thus, the nation also has a natural impulse to control this maritime flank for their own security.[37] Historical animosity certainly contributes towards the tensions that arise out of this dispute, particularly for China, as their loss of territorial sovereignty to Japan in the past remains an emotional and humiliating chapter of Chinese culture.[38] However, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute is ultimately a geopolitical struggle for energy resources, not a nationalistic fight.

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Taiwan

Similarly, although not outright disputed, the question of the sovereignty of Taiwan remains a source of tension between Japan and China. State propaganda in China has made the 'recovery' of the 'lost territories' of Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan a source of national pride, and representative of China's renewal after years of war and submission.[39] Japanese colonisation of Taiwan in 1895 is regarded by China as Taiwan's original disunion from the Chinese mainland; as such, China expects Japan, as an act of contrition, to support the Chinese Taiwan policy.[40] However, this has not been demonstrated; in February 2005, the US–Japan Security Alliance issued a joint statement naming Taiwan as a 'common strategic objective', drawing an immediate rebuke from China.[41] Concurrently, the possibility of Chinese annexation of Taiwan remains a significant security threat to Japan. According to Hisahiko Okazaki, a former official of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'not only could China's annexation of Taiwan compromise vital sea lanes through which Japan imports most of its oils from the Middle East, it could also provide China with extreme leverage over the other nations of Southeast Asia... [having] a severe impact on Japan's economic interests in the region.'[42] Thus, whilst China feels animosity towards Japan over the two nations' shared history in Taiwan, the dispute remains an issue of regional stability.

Energy Security

Since the Second Sino–Japanese War, the need for resources and energy security has risen in prominence for both Chinese and Japanese national agendas.[43] Both China and Japan depend on foreign oil for the sustenance of their domestic economy; because the majority of both of their foreign oil intakes are from the Middle East, and because the availability of these resources is steadily shrinking (according to 'peak oil' theory), Sino–Japanese competition is high.[44] In particular, the massive expansion of China's economy in the early- to mid-1990s has exacerbated the energy competition, reflecting realist power politics.[45] Through examples such as the Tyumen oil project, access to Russian oil pipelines, and the dispute over gas exploration in the East China Sea, it has been evident that the availability and competition for petroleum has had a direct impact on Sino–Japanese relations.[46] The cases demonstrate that, if the two nations were to resolve issues based purely on economic considerations, energy competitions would be fast resolved through cooperation, for mutual benefit.[47] However, political reasons such as historical animosity, particularly in the case of the East China Sea gas dispute, continue to stymie collaboration between the two nations.[48]

It should be noted that the energy security as a source of tension in Sino–Japanese relations began long before the Second Sino–Japanese War. Indeed, it was because of market expansion and the need for more raw resources that catalysed Japan's imperialistic advance into Japan, which remains the primary source of historical animosity between the two nations today. As such, energy security is not only a significant factor which contributes to Sino–Japanese tensions, but it is also a factor which predates the historical animosity that plagues the relationship today.

Conclusion

The Sino–Japanese relationship is one that continues to be wrought with distrust and tension. Since Japanese imperialism in the late-19th to mid-20th century, historical animosity has been a major factor in the actions and affairs between China and Japan. However, to claim that history is the sole reason behind tensions which exist today between the two East Asian giants is overly simplistic and incorrect. Instead, a realist perspective, and the security dilemma theory shows most of the tensions may be attributed to stability and security objectives. In particular, the current disputes over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and Taiwan are likely to have existed, though perhaps not to the current height of animosity, even in the absence of historical enmity between the two nations. Additionally, the energy security competition which continues today was a source of tension before historical animosity arose in the Sino–Japanese relationship. Thus, whilst historical tension is a massive and unavoidable source of Sino–Japanese tensions, a lack of acknowledgement of other contributing factors is an extremely one-dimensional analysis.

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