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Future Patterns in China-Japan Power Relations: A Problematic and Puzzling Reality

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the changing power dynamics between China and Japan and to assess their implications for the two countries' perceptions, beliefs and attitudes towards each other and the changing patterns of security in Asia. It argues that China's expanding power coupled with the recently accelerated emergence of a more assertive or proactive Japan has created the conditions for a deep and decisive turn in Chinese thinking on the character and structure of the U.S.-Japan alliance, the main forces shaping the evolving structure of power in Asia, and the parameters of political and strategic interaction between China and Japan within this structure. It begins by canvassing the Japan-related assumptions that have governed China's expectations of a future regional security order since the end of the Cold War, and how they have been challenged over the last several years by the erosion of Japan's identity as a passive and reactive state, the growing importance of popular opinion to China's foreign policy decision-making, and the transformation and realignment of the U.S.-Japan security alliance. Proceeding from the premise that these developments have cast doubt over commonly offered predictions of the conditions in which conflict and cooperation are likely to result between China and Japan, it then turns to what can be done now to peacefully manage the China-Japan relationship during a period of transition in which profound uncertainty about Japan's security role(s) will probably make it difficult for many Chinese not to see malign intentions in Japan's every move.

The accelerated emergence of a more assertive Japanese security policy since the terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001 has altered fundamentally the parameters of interaction between China and Japan. It has also drawn much attention (and more than its fair share of hyperbole) to changes underway in the structure of power and parameters of interaction that have characterized international relations in the Asia-Pacific region since the Second World War (Shambaugh 2005, 1). This state of political and strategic flux presents us with an excellent opportunity to reevaluate some of the prevailing Chinese assumptions about Japan as a security actor, and how recent and emerging challenges to these assumptions are making possible new processes that throw into question some conventional analyses of the essential features of the China-Japan relationship and where it is, or could be heading. With this in mind, the purpose of this paper is to provide a critical, broad-brush analysis of the changing power dynamics between

China and Japan and to assess the implications of these changing dynamics for the two countries' perceptions, beliefs and attitudes towards each other and the changing patterns of regional security. It will unfold in two sections. The first section overviews the key assumptions that have governed Chinese expectations of a future regional order since the end of the Cold War, and how these assumptions have been challenged over the last several years (the post-11 September 2001 period) by the erosion of Japan's identity as a passive and reactive state and the transformation and realignment of the U.S.-Japan security alliance. This will be followed by discussion of the implications of these developments for the unavoidably difficult choices decision-makers in both China and Japan will face over the next decade or so as the strategic configuration of Asia adapts to accommodate the broader forces for change in the geopolitical circumstances of the region. It then turns to what can be done now to peacefully manage the China-Japan relationship during a period of transition in which profound uncertainty about Japan's security role(s) (and, for now at least, an absence of a settled pattern of relations between the major powers) will probably make it difficult for many Chinese not to see malign intentions in Japan's every move.

Setting the Scene

Over the past century-and-a-half or so, China and Japan have struggled to get along. They have both also struggled in a number of ways, and with differing degrees of success, to maintain, create, or recover a sense of regional pre-eminence. Following the war against China fought and won by Japan between 1894 and 1895, the Imperial Japanese state sought to impose its vision of a future regional order on all the countries of East Asia. Then, after the surrender of Japan in 1945 the United States (with a demoralized but newly allied Japan in tow) became the principle provider of regional order and stability through its system of defensive bilateral military alliances (McDougall *et al* 2007, 12). Today, while this American-brokered bilateral alliance system remains intact and largely unchallenged as the most dominant politico-security structure in Asia, increasing Japanese contributions to its changing roles and functions are making it more difficult than it has been for some time for decision-makers in both China and Japan to hide their different strategic priorities. This is because the accelerated emergence of a more assertive Japan

within the context of the changing (and implicitly anti-Chinese) roles and functions of the U.S. alliance system has hardened negative conspiratorial Chinese thinking on Japan by lending credence to the view popular in some quarters of China that reformers inside Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) are fully committed to creating new avenues for Japan to figure more prominently in America's blueprint for how it will pursue its future security goals. Identification in China of trajectory between Japan's changing identity as an inherently passive and reactive state and the antagonistic logic of a militarily strong Japan operating under the aegis of the U.S. alliance system in Asia has contributed greatly in recent years to not only an intensification of strategic competition between China and Japan, but also a new phase of regional security. One in which the mechanisms of the old 'hub and spokes' security structure in Asia are being overlaid with new security relations (Bisley 2008, 39). As shown below, it is in the context of close and careful consideration of how these landmark developments interact and reinforce each other that we can begin to see clearly the many problems and opportunities that China and Japan now face in relation to each other. And, how these problems and opportunities are changing, or could in the future change the methods sought and used by both countries to achieve their desired goals.

New Terms of Engagement: The Post-11 September Security Setting

While it is clear with the benefit of hindsight that the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001 did provide defense-planners in Tokyo with a readily definable short-term 'anti-terrorism' pretext to quickly increase Japan's international security contributions, the extent to which Japan's subsequent related policies and actions have changed China's views of the long-term evolution of the China-Japan relationship is less clear.

As one might expect given the voluminous body of literature on China's relationship with Japan, there is more than one school of thought here. Some experts in the field, for example, position Japan's evolving security role, as well as the changing dynamics of China-Japan relations, in the context of Japan's role in the violent meta-narrative of twentieth century power politics. The emphasis here is on the enduring power of the deeply felt historically-based enmity directed toward Japan in China. This feeling, it is argued, while obviously having a major influence on

the Chinese government's behavior toward Japan, also perpetuates a negative image of Japan in the minds of many Chinese who fear that Japan is liable, if given the opportunity, to relapse into a phase of expansionist militarism comparable to that of Imperial Japan prior and during the Second World War (McCargo 2004, 3). The point to emphasize here above all is that it is this Chinese sensitivity to any sudden change in Japan's policy and posture that, to proponents of this view, still makes it taboo for those in Japan's strategic circles to seriously discuss the use of genuinely offensive military power. Alternatively, some scholars and analysts portray Japan as a 'knowing accomplice' of U.S. strategic policy in Asia that is tentatively complying with U.S. demands but as much as possible seeking to avoid direct involvement in U.S.-led military affairs abroad (Tanter 2005, 3). According to proponents of this way of observing Japan as a security actor, Japan's leaders are now willing to comply with Washington's demands only when it advances the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) own domestic and foreign policy goals (Tanter 2005, 3). Prompted partly by the North Korean nuclear crisis, partly by China's rise, and partly by the domestic LDP-driven reform agenda, Japan's strategists are, according to this view, now desperately looking for new ways to develop a more robust defense force. In the minds of many Chinese, this reflects a groundswell of support in Japan's security policy-making establishment for the revision of Article 9 of Japan's post-war 'Peace Constitution' (Fukuyama 2005, 81). This deeply concerns China's leaders because Article 9 negates the need for Japanese force projection (offensive) capabilities and is fundamental to Chinese understanding's of Japan's 'passive' post-war foreign policy (Cooney 2002, 50). The key point here is that China's leaders are fully aware that the perception in China (and elsewhere) that Japan's leaders are looking for new ways to maneuver around Article 9 makes it difficult for many Chinese not to think that Japan's leaders are now willingly allowing the United States to lock Japan into a position of long-term strategic antagonism with China. Of relevance here is the work of Asian security scholar Rex Li. Li has argued that the 'Japan-U.S. Joint Declaration on Security Alliance for the Twenty First Century', drafted under President Clinton and Prime Minister Hashimoto, was the beginning of Japan's now accelerating transition from economic power to political power (Li 1999, 5). To Li, and indeed most proponents of this way of observing Japan, this is proof-positive that Japan's leaders will in the future be much less tentative in promoting Japan's own national security interests – regardless of long-standing internal and external pressures to do otherwise.

So what does all this tell us about future patterns in China-Japan power relations? In singling out recent changes in the instruments of the U.S.-Japan security alliance, including Japan's quiet build-up of some of the Asia Pacific's most impressive military hardware (in pure order of battle terms), the implications for China and Japan certainly appear to be long term. Since agreeing on common strategic objectives in the aftermath of September 2001 the United States and Japan have worked closely together on a wide range of security issues*. In the process of doing this, both countries have advanced bilateral contingency planning, enhanced information sharing, improved interoperability for joint operations and joint responses, expanded opportunities for bilateral training exercises, and broadened the geographical and functional scope of the Japanese Self Defense Force (JSDF) beyond what many Chinese would argue are acceptable limits of self-defense. These are important changes. However, in and of themselves they explain little about the qualitative significance of the linkages that they have cemented in Chinese thinking on the changing regional security environment and Japan's recent policies and actions. To understand fully the implications of strengthening U.S.-Japan security arrangements for Chinese thinking on both scores we need to look beyond conventional balance of power based arguments based on material-structural changes ongoing in Japan's strategic interactions with the United States and instead consider how Japan's renewed assertiveness is changing our perceptions of how power, interests and identities come together to shape Chinese-Japanese interactions more broadly.

As Guzzini writes:

Power is still a short cut for understanding international affairs, its un-discussed ubiquity an indicator of intellectual laziness. In other words, power has been a short circuit for leaving things unexplained despite opposite appearance. Taking the recent power debate seriously could avoid power arguments still being used as apparently sensible answers whose only certainty is to kill theoretical reflection and empirical research (Guzzini 1993, 478).

* Between September 2001 and September 2006 the Koizumi administration passed an Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law (ATSML) and dispatched the Maritime Self Defense Force (MSDF) from November 2001 onwards to provide logistical support in the Indian Ocean for U.S. and international coalition forces engaged in *Operation Enduring Freedom* (Hughes 2009, 11). Moreover, during this period the Japanese government committed Japan to bilateral technological and strategic cooperation with the United States on ballistic-missile defense (BMD). This was part of a series of initiatives put in place by the Koizumi administration in post-September 2001 to strengthen the JSDF and extend the scope and functions of the U.S.-Japan alliance for regional and global deployments.

While it is important to recognize that there are *Realpolitik* elements in China's strategic culture that do revolve around simple realist notions of how the world works: power is what matters; and what matters in power is one's relative capabilities compared with those of others, mainstream realist-based explanations for conflict and cooperation in international politics do not, in the final analysis, permit us to do this. This is because appreciation of the domestic-political and social-ideational factors that are central to any worthwhile analysis of the perceptual dimensions of the China-Japan relationship are simply too easily overlooked within the realist discourse. For this reason alone, a conceptual framework that facilitates a more synthetic assessment of Chinese-Japanese interactions is needed. One, that is, that is inclusive of power-based arguments but not beholden to them to the extent that it precludes us from exploring all of the other forces, factors and processes that are required to better understand why Japan's push to become a more active military power is reorienting China-Japan relations and the regional security order.

The View of the Chinese Populous

There is a need to enhance our capacity for understanding of the qualitative and quantitative significance of the linkages that the notion of an 'un-pacifist' Japan has cemented in Chinese popular thinking on the causal relationship between the changing patterns of regional security and the ways in which Japan's changing identity as a passive state could limit China's ability to achieve its desired goals. Again, this requires that we pay more attention than we have in the past to enhancing our understanding of the causal relationship between Chinese popular anti-Japanese feeling and China's decision-making process regarding Japan.

One of the biggest problems here for China's leaders is the perception that Japan is now willing to take on security roles that risk locking it into a position of long-term strategic antagonism with China. This is problematic for a number of reasons, not least of all because it has drawn a great deal of (unwanted) international attention to the causal relationship that currently exists between China's domestic and foreign policy agendas and Beijing's post-Cold War dependence on the promotion of popular Chinese nationalism. Allow me to explain.

The image of the world that the China's leaders hold plays an important role in determining what many Chinese believe are acceptable parameters interaction between China and Japan. This has much to do with the fact that China's worldview and Chinese popular nationalism increasingly reflect popular Chinese interpretations of its modern history. Simply stated, China's leaders are aware that nationalism, if left unchecked, can quickly generate its own momentum outside the wishes of the central leadership. This momentum, they worry, could then be used to open new domestic-political space for public criticism of China's top leaders who appear to capitulate to foreign governments: just as easily as it could be used to bolster support for those leaders who are perceived to be upholding China's interests (Harding 2007, 30). As Allen S. Whiting (1960, 171) put it in a different era and context, 'in open diplomacy, political prestige limits the choice of action to what seems popularly acceptable'. In what is almost-certainly a reflection of the Beijing's growing uncertainty on this score, which is to say its inability to determine with full confidence which choice of action or words regarding some of the more sensitive Japan-related issues is and is not going to be popularly acceptable, China's top leaders have recently sought to downplay the promotion of nationalism in their official dealings with Japan.

Assuming, as we have so far, that Chinese attitudes towards Japan must develop at the societal level before China and Japan can hope to develop a genuinely cooperative relationship, and that in the mean time it is in both countries best interests to keep relations stable so as to prevent their relationship sliding into a phase of open conflict, it is, at first sight, difficult from China's viewpoint to put a positive spin on a Japan that appears to be abandoning its purely defensive posture in favor of the development of conventional military power. This is because the integration of an openly assertive or 'normal' Japan into a region (and Chinese domestic-political culture) not yet capable of dealing with it poses an emerging dilemma for the Chinese government: How can Beijing accept of a larger international security role for Japan (and all that that entails) without compromising China's security and/or exacerbating the deeply-felt historically based enmity directed toward Japan in China? If they are seen at home and abroad to be developing strategies for the explicit purpose of deterring what they perceive as hostile forces from colluding against China they will justify, inadvertently or otherwise, foreign attributions to China of threat and (by logical implication if you live in a zero-sum world) the development of an alliance system

against it. Conversely, if they are seen to be doing nothing the domestic authority/legitimacy of the Chinese government (which is heavily reliant upon the Chinese leadership's ability to create and maintain a regional order that is conducive to China's continued overall development) could be badly weakened - perhaps irreparably. What this means so far as we are concerned here is that as long as China's top leaders continue to seek legitimacy through the popular aspirations of the people (Johnston 1995, 130), they will be forced to play a two-level game: On one level they will have to keep coming up with ways to reassure the international community that as China becomes a great power it will behave like one: it will not become too assertive with its neighbors or too aggressive in its efforts to push the United States out of Asia. On another level they will have to keep coming up with new ways to alleviate the domestic-political pressure on Beijing to act now to 'discourage' Japan and the United States from colluding against China. These paradoxical imperatives explain to a significant extent why the Japan-China relationship is now viewed by many analysts as one of the most puzzling and problematic in Asia's history (Earl 2006, 17). It also explains why the debate now underway within China's foreign ministry over the question of how to control mass attitudes towards Japan in China increasingly has less to do with the question of whether or not domestic or external forces are driving the changes underway in the character and structure of the Japanese state, and more to do with the problems that could be generated domestically by not being able to tell the difference between the two.

Two Alternative Visions

So what can be done now to peacefully manage the China-Japan relationship during a period of transition in which profound uncertainty about Japan's future security path will probably make it difficult for many Chinese (and the Chinese government) not to see malign intentions in Japan's every move? For some time now scholars and policy makers have been arguing that the existing structures for advancing regional security interests are outdated and that new approaches are needed (Tow 2001, 23). Taking up this line of argument, this section of the paper discusses two alternatives to the regional status quo ante that could provide the Chinese government with a new and very different strategy for dealing with these paradoxical internal-external imperatives. While space constraints preclude a detailed examination here of all of the forces and factors that

are currently shaping Chinese-Japanese interactions, some general imprecise speculation about what might be is useful in so far as it can help us identify from afar the emerging political and strategic dots that will eventually need to be connected between China's views of Japan's China-policy and the strategic rationale behind the evolving regional order.

Modifying the 'Hub and Spokes' System

The first option discussed is a continuation of the 'Hub and Spokes' system of American-led bilateral military alliances, but with a much more evenly balanced, mutually reinforcing, and explicitly progressive U.S.-Japan security alliance at its core (Shambaugh 2005, 14). The idea of China formally embracing the U.S.-Japan alliance as *the* enduring security structure in Asia is, of course, not without serious limitations and constraints. Although China's leaders have much to gain from a regional order that maintains peace in the Taiwan Strait, deters a hostile North Korea and generally provides stability (these are viewed by many observers as the U.S.-Japan alliance's biggest contributions to regional peace and stability), it is clear that China's leaders would right now oppose in-principle any changes to the existing regional order that, even in the name of achieving the above, permits or encourages Japan to take on a larger security role.

However, if a larger security role for Japan could be negotiated between Tokyo and Beijing independent from direct consultation with the United States, and, if in the process of these negotiations Japan could find a way to ease popular Chinese concerns that it is liable, if given the opportunity, to relapse into a phase of expansionist militarism comparable to that of Imperial Japan prior and during the Second World War, this could be a workable option. That being said, even if Japan could convince the Chinese government and people that it will do everything in its power to avoid an international situation in which it has to choose between its alliance with the United States and stable relations with China (this would be *the* sticking point for the Chinese government), such a scenario would hinge almost-entirely on the political will of all concerned (friends and allies of China and Japan) to endure an period of regional instability and a probable sharp rise in the historically based social and ideological tensions between the two countries.

This seems unlikely at the present time.

Embracing Normalcy

The second option, also not without some obvious limitations and constraints, involves China accepting a normalized international security role for Japan independent of the United States, including Japanese development of conventional military power outside the confines of the U.S.-Japan security alliance. This would require a great deal of adjustment on China's part. It would also require the Japanese government and people to come to terms with a vision of its future (and Asia's) without the full diplomatic and military support of the United States. Such difficulties aside, if this were to happen, one of the major benefits for both China and Japan would be that accusations by some of the more hard-line nationalists in China that the United States is trying to contain China via the U.S.-Japan alliance would become incredulous, especially if the emergence of Japan as a 'normal' power was accompanied by a corresponding scaling-down of America's military presence in the region. This would not only make possible a balance of power system in Asia between China and Japan, but also a more constructive relationship between China and the United States, the likes of which would encourage all concerned to bid farewell to the past and create a new era without hegemonism and hegemonic powers (Lyman Miller and Liu 2001, 147).

However, this situation would invite as many dangers as it would opportunities. For example, if China's leaders believed that they no longer had to worry about deflecting U.S. strategic focus on China's expanding power to alleviate mounting domestic-political pressure on them to come up with a countervailing strategy to U.S.-led alliances directed against it, they may see a window of opportunity to establish a Sino-centric regional order. That is to say, create a regional order (via force if required) that is amenable to China's interests while they can. Unfortunately, there is simply no way for the Chinese government to convince skeptics that this would not happen: China could only sign on to an agreement that could be backed away from at a future date. This means that the incentives for China not to take such action would have to be seen abroad to be sufficiently strong to allay fears that there are circumstances in which China would deem it in its best interests to initiate war. Official Chinese acknowledgement of legitimate right of Japan to protect itself in such circumstances, or, put more diplomatically, during an phase of geopolitical relations in which American military power and diplomatic influence is no longer the dominant force it once was in the region, would be absolutely essential in this regard.

In looking briefly at these alternative scenarios to the regional status quo, it is obvious that we need to think more carefully than we have done in the past about how to weigh-up the relative risk and potential gain of major change. Does a period of short-term instability which would accompany any major structural overhaul of the existing regional order outweigh the risk of no change at all? As anxiety inducing as any major structural change would be for all concerned, it seems, in view of recent trends and developments, that if China and Japan continue to address their politico-strategic relations through the prism of the triangular relationship with the United States, it will become increasingly difficult for both countries to ensure their vital interests without stimulating domestic-political chaos and political-military rivalries in the process. So while the answer at the present time might be 'no', at some point in the future it might be 'yes'. This warrants the question being asked without prejudice. Choosing for the sake of analytical convenience to avoid asking it at all sends a dangerous signal to lesser powers in the region: namely, that they must develop strategies now to insulate themselves against an 'inevitable' major power confrontation before it is too late, this specter of which places artificially narrow limitations on what a region built around a strong China and a relatively strong Japan can achieve (Li 2006).

Concluding Remarks

The attitudinal shift in Japan since September 2001 away from accommodating China's interests by shying away from Japan's own concerns has fundamentally altered the parameters of political and strategic interaction between China and Japan. While it is important to differentiate between strategies and actual policy practices, from the pattern of behavior described above we have obtained two useful insights into what the continued emergence of a more assertive Japan could mean and entail for the future direction of the China-Japan relationship: a more and strategically significant relationship between Japan and the United States does (under prevailing conditions) unavoidably prefigure a shift away from pacifism towards activism in the methods sought and used by Japan to pursue its security aims; and, perhaps more importantly, the changing patterns of regional security are making it more difficult for those in Japan's strategic circles to maintain a balance acceptable to the Chinese government and people between honoring its commitment to

do more to support the evolving U.S. alliance system and demonstrating adequate sensitivity to growing Chinese concerns that Japan's pacifist identity is being eroded.

This strongly suggests that in the short-to-medium term China will be forced to deal with two Japans: on the one hand an increasingly assertive and self-confident security actor gearing itself up to challenge China politically and militarily for regional preeminence; and on the other hand, a constitutionally inhibited security actor still committed to its post-war pacifist traditions and worried about its limited capacity to determine the nature and scope of its contributions to U.S.-led military operations abroad. Both are simplifications of reality. To avoid resorting to either of these extremes we must continue to scrutinize the default realist analytical framework that has long dominated 'serious' research on China's security relations with Japan. This is the only way to develop a conceptual framework that facilitates a more synthetic assessment of China-Japan relations as they develop: one that is inclusive of realist-centric approaches but not beholden to them to the extent that it precludes us from exploring the social-ideational sources of friction and dispute between the two countries. The only alternative is to resign ourselves to the notion that a larger regional security role for Japan must lead to a politically and militarily divided regional order and leave it at that. Choosing not to muddle through this paradigm and unquestioningly allow negative-conspiratorial thinking to dominate points not only to the merits of developing more interpretive ways of observing China-Japan relations, but also the possibility of developing a more genuinely cooperative security nexus in Asia in which rivalry is not implicit and change is not automatically feared or opposed.

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