



Japan's Abrasive Conduct toward China and South Korea Causes Headaches for Washington

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Observers in both East Asia and the United States have become increasingly worried about the growing tensions between China and Japan. There is also a tendency to place the bulk of the deterioration in the bilateral relationship on Beijing. That is especially true since China's November 2013 proclamation of a new Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea. The United States and its East Asian allies closed ranks to condemn Beijing's action as disruptive and provocative and proceeded to challenge the ADIZ's provisions with military flights.

But the tendency to focus on Sino-Japanese tensions and blame China for them was evident even before the ADIZ episode. Especially as the long-standing bilateral territorial dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands began to heat up in 2012, China was increasingly portrayed as the primary troublemaker and Japan the victim. That was certainly the stance that the U.S. government adopted.

There are two problems with the conventional wisdom on the recent surge of tensions in East Asia. First, the growing animosity between Beijing and Tokyo is not the only source of worry. Relations between Japan and South Korea have also taken an ominous turn. Second,

Tokyo's sometimes abrasive conduct has played a significant role in fueling the growing hostility in both relationships.

The alarming deterioration in relations between China and Japan has [some experts now warning](#) that even the possibility of war between East Asia's two leading powers can no longer be dismissed. The animosity between Tokyo and Seoul has received less attention, but that relationship is also on a worrisome trajectory. One source of trouble is the dispute involving competing claims to uninhabited islets (called Takeshima in Japan and Dokdo in Korea). That controversy has created periodic irritation for years, but tensions became worse when then-South Korean President Lee Myung Bak made an ostentatious state visit to the island chain in August 2012. The Japanese government recalled its ambassador to Seoul to protest the visit, and inflammatory rhetoric on both sides soared. The Dokdo/Takeshima dispute has intensified again over the past few months.

The main source of tension, though, is the apparent insensitivity of Japanese leaders (and much of the public) toward the unhealed emotional wounds of Koreans regarding the conduct of Imperial Japan during the first 4 ½ decades of the twentieth century. Prominent Japanese periodically exacerbate tensions by making clumsy, insensitive statements about that period. One was Osaka mayor Toru Hashimoto's comment that World War II "comfort women" (young, mostly Korean women that the Japanese military pressed into sexual slavery) had been necessary to maintain discipline.

That insensitivity was on display again last month when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo. The remains of 14 prominent war criminals (as well as many lesser offenders) from the World War II era are interred at Yasukuni, and while Abe's pilgrimage gratified nationalist elements in his governing Liberal Democratic Party, it enraged populations throughout East Asia, especially in South Korea and China.

Writing in the January 6, 2014, *New York Times*, Sung-Yoon Lee, Professor of Korean Studies at Tuft University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, noted that even before Abe's visit to Yasukuni, South Korea had rebuffed Japan for over a year regarding closer security ties because of provocative historical slights. "To Washington's dismay, Mr. Abe's disregard for Koreans' sense of the trauma about the Japanese occupation has given South Korea's president, Park Geun-hye, no option but to cool relations" even further.

China's reaction to Abe's visit was equally hostile, with numerous demands in the country's media for "retaliation." The degree of anger was nearly as great as the aftermath of the Japanese government's provocative decision to purchase several of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands from private owners. That incident triggered anti-Japanese rioting in several Chinese cities.

Although Washington has generally welcomed Tokyo's greater activism on regional security issues, as well as the Abe's government's decision to boost defense spending, even U.S. officials now seem concerned about the abrasive behavior of its ally. In unusually pointed language, the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo criticized Abe's visit to Yasukuni: "The United States is disappointed that Japan's leadership has taken an action that will exacerbate tensions with Japan's neighbors."

Washington has reason to be nervous, especially because of its bilateral defense treaties with Japan and South Korea. Although an armed clash between Japan and China is not yet likely, the trend is worrisome and even the nightmare scenario of war cannot be ruled out. Even worse, U.S. leaders have foolishly insisted that the defense pact with Tokyo applies not only to indisputable Japanese territory but also to the highly contested Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. That stance puts the United States on the front lines of the worsening confrontation between China and Japan, and that prospect is more than a little troubling given the Abe government's increasingly abrasive behavior.

Although an armed conflict between Tokyo and Seoul is even less likely than a Sino-Japanese war, Washington's defense obligations create an extremely awkward situation for the U.S., if the Japanese-South Korean relationship crumbles. Clearly, Washington would not be able to honor its obligations to both parties, if they came to blows. Moreover, even a cold war between Japan and South Korea would undermine, perhaps fatally, the U.S. network of alliances in East Asia.

U.S. policy in that region since the end of World War II has been based on the assumption that Japan is a conservative, status quo—even quasi-pacifist—country. But Tokyo's conduct toward both Beijing and Seoul over the past few years—especially since Shinzo Abe became prime minister—raises serious questions about that assumption. Washington needs to exercise great care that its Japanese ally does not drag America into unnecessary and potentially lethal quarrels.

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