

## Japan's Containment Strategy against China

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Japan has begun to play a more vigorous role in East Asia's security affairs, and China is responding with a mixture of wariness and outright hostility. That development puts the United States in an awkward position. Japan is Washington's most important political and military ally in the region, as well as a long-standing, crucial economic partner. But China's economic importance to the United States, already substantial, is likely to become even more so in the coming years. And U.S. officials understand that China is a fast-rising geopolitical player in East Asia and globally.

Washington wants to maintain friendly, productive relations with both countries, but that task may prove extremely challenging in the coming decade. Because of historical factors, especially Imperial Japan's brutal treatment of a weak China during the 1930s and early 1940s, Sino-Japanese relations have typically been rather cool, despite substantial economic ties. Overall bilateral relations have become even frostier over the past year or so.

The proximate cause of that chill is the territorial dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. That simmering quarrel flared in mid and late 2012 when the Japanese government purchased some of the islands from a private owner and proceeded to tighten its administrative control. Anti-Japanese riots erupted in several Chinese cities during that period.

Chinese leaders see Tokyo's actions regarding the islands as symptomatic of a broader, worrisome trend in the country's behavior. The emergence of the nationalistic Shinzo Abe as Japan's prime minister adds to Beijing's concerns. Indications that Tokyo might end its self-imposed limit of spending no more than one percent of the country's annual gross domestic product on the military provoke strongly negative reactions in Beijing. The same is true of signs that Abe's government might seek to modify article 9 of Japan's post-World War II constitution, which places severe restrictions on the country's use of military force. "Given the Japanese government's refusal to apologize for Japan's aggression during World War II, any revision of Japan's constitution," an editorial in *China Daily* warned, would be "a cause for concern in the rest of the world."

Japan is fast embracing a more active foreign policy, especially with regard to security matters, and much of the policy appears aimed at curbing China's power and influence in the region. Even ostensibly non-military measures seem to have that goal. In late May, Japan canceled the remaining debt that Myanmar owed to Tokyo and then extended a new loan for \$504 million. That was an unsubtle effort to dilute Beijing's influence with a long-standing economic and security client.

Japan's direct moves regarding security issues have spooked Chinese leaders even more, as the Japanese government has established or strengthened security ties with several countries. In January 2013, Tokyo and Manila agreed to enhance their cooperation on maritime security. Collaboration also is growing between Japan and both Singapore and Australia on such matters. In the recent summit between Prime Minister Abe and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the first steps were taken toward cooperation between their two countries on the highly sensitive issue of nuclear technology.

Tokyo's rhetoric is also noticeably more assertive—and not just on its territorial dispute with China. In early April, former defense minister Shigeru Ishiba, a leading figure in the governing Liberal Democratic Party, insisted that Japan had a right to launch preemptive military strikes against North Korea—another prominent Chinese client—if officials concluded that an act of aggression was imminent.

China has recently softened its overall policy in East Asia in an attempt to appear more reasonable to its neighbors and to focus attention (and suspicion) on Japan's ambitions. Speaking to the Shangri-La Dialogue, an annual security conference in Singapore, in early June, Lt. Gen. Qi Jianguo, deputy chief of staff of the People's Liberation Army, affirmed that China recognized Japan's sovereignty over Okinawa and the other islands in the Ruyuku chain. His statement repudiated an earlier editorial in *People's Daily*, the Chinese Communist Party's main publication, which questioned Japan's historical claim to those islands. The *People's Daily* comment had sparked widespread worries that the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute might escalate dramatically, with unpleasant ramifications for the entire region.

Beijing's diplomatic olive branch, though, is accompanied by pressure on the United States to rein-in its Japanese ally. And there is an undertone of suspicion that Washington is actually encouraging Tokyo's bolder stance. China rebuked then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for supporting Japan's right to administer the disputed islands. "We urge the U.S. side to take a responsible attitude towards dealing with the Diaoyu Islands," stated Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei, adding that U.S. officials needed to "be cautious in what they say and do and take concrete steps to maintain regional stability."

Other Chinese opinion leaders have been more caustic regarding U.S. policy. In October, veteran Chinese diplomat Chen Jia charged that Washington was deliberately using Japan as a strategic tool aimed at containing China. Chen, who earlier served as China's ambassador to Japan, accused the United States of encouraging the revival of Japanese militarism.

The Obama administration will continue to be buffeted by such conflicting pressures from East Asia's two leading powers. Japan is insisting on stronger backing from its American ally, not only regarding its territorial dispute with China but on such matters as dealing with North Korea. Tokyo is seeking nothing less than Washington's endorsement of a more active, vigorous Japanese security role in East Asia. It has already secured U.S. backing for the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute, and it is clear that the Obama administration sees Japan as a crucial component of the U.S. strategic pivot to East Asia. But if the United States embraces a more assertive Japanese regional security role, it risks antagonizing an already worried and annoyed China. Washington needs to proceed with great caution, lest it find itself in the middle of a growing power struggle between Japan and China.

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