

Japan: Rising Tensions With China

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From the dawn of its history, Japan's relationship with China has been a troubled one. While the origin of the Japanese people is shrouded in mystery, what is clear is that the two peoples have borne an antipathy for each other from antiquity, both at times considering the other to be barbarian. In the Medieval period, when strong Chinese emperors ruled, they struggled over the Korean Peninsula. Later, Japanese pirates were the bane of coastal China. More recently, the two nations fought two wars, the first in 1894 and the second in 1937. During World War II, Japanese territorial conquests and atrocities left deep wounds among the Chinese.

Japan's economy soared in the decades after its defeat by the Allies, while China suffered the throes of civil war and its aftermath under the victorious Communists. Yet, as the Cold War was ending, their situations reversed: China's economic potential was unleashed once Deng Xiaoping's reforms took hold, contrasting with Japan's sharp, two-decades-long economic decline and paralysis. China now has the world's second biggest economy, while Japan's has dropped to third.

The economic, demographic, and military power of China looms like a pall over Japan, and its politicians and citizens see it as an existential threat. However, recent events—like the 9.0 Tohoku earthquake that damaged reactors at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in March 2011 and the weakening of the Liberal Democratic Party that has dominated Japanese politics since the 1950s—have combined to begin to shake Japan out of its stagnation. While still uncertain, the country is slowly returning to its more nationalistic stance, an attitude that its neighbors once feared.

However, these are early days. This nascent nationalistic undercurrent may be a substantial force for change, fueling a movement to eliminate its postwar taboos, or it could fizzle out under the weight of Japan's many problems, such as its extremely low birthrate, its burdened social security system, its moribund economy, and its stressed power grid. The nation balances on a knife's edge.

A recent Pew Research poll reported that just 6% of Chinese had a favorable view of Japan, and in Japan, only 5% view China favorably. This antipathy provides the backdrop for Japan's relationship with China, and right now, that relationship overshadows everything. Twenty-three thousand Japanese companies operate in China, employing ten million Chinese workers. Japan envisions the success of these businesses in the vast Chinese market as essential to reviving its domestic economy, even while its distrust of China compels them to hedge their bets by shifting investment to the smaller economies of Southeast Asia.

If Japan continues to increase its trade with the tigers of Southeast Asia, the chance of conflict with China must intensify due to heavy Chinese involvement there. It could even lead to maritime clashes, as each country vies to protect its overseas interests. Inevitably, the Japanese people would demand a more assertive foreign policy and perhaps even military engagement to keep China at bay. At this time, Japanese naval prowess, despite the nation's recent pacifism, is still superior to China's, and if forced, could blunt or even curb Beijing's growing maritime ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region. If such a situation occurred, it could balance the powers in the East China Sea without the direct involvement of the U.S. Navy, but it could also lead to America losing control of its long-time ally.

Events may be forcing matters toward conflict. At the Munich Security Conference held in January, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying assessed the China-Japan relationship to be “at its worst.” At Davos, a Chinese delegation member called Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and North Korea’s Kim Jong Un “troublemakers,” essentially equating the two. Not to be outdone, Abe described China as militaristic and overly aggressive, comparing it to pre-World War I Germany.

It is not just a war of words. Pushing tensions to new highs, Beijing instituted an extended Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the East China Sea last November, requiring aircraft to follow instructions issued by Chinese authorities, even over contested territories. A month later, Abe visited Yasukuni Shrine, a lightning rod for anti-Japanese sentiment, since it is associated with Japanese militarism during World War II.

While these are fairly minor provocations, there is always a chance that such an insignificant act could ignite a far larger conflagration. For instance, Japan frequently scrambles its jets to deal with what they consider to be Chinese “incursions” into their territory. What if one of the pilots of either side became trigger-happy? With the strained relations and antagonistic history of these two nations, the aggrieved side will assume the worst of the aggressor’s intentions. Worse, at present, Japan and China have no diplomatic outreach to try to avoid such “misunderstandings.”

Both nations know that a war is not in their best interests, yet they have their reasons for prolonging tensions. For one thing, it creates positive political approval back home, making the leaders of each nation look strong against their historic enemies across the water. Prime Minister Abe in particular sees a strong and vital China to be a continuing threat to Japan’s status in Asia. Thus, if he feels pushed by China, he will not hesitate to push back in kind.

Most likely, over the near term, we can probably expect the two nations to sustain their tit-for-tat relationship. Military conflict between the two is a longshot, but not out of the question. If the mutual retaliation lasts long enough, public opinion will be aggravated, and Abe will certainly attempt either to go around Japan’s prohibitions to use force in international disputes or to have them emended. Either way, change in Japan’s military stance will likely occur sooner than later.