

Resurgent Nationalism and Changing Security Perceptions in Contemporary Japan-China Relations

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Abstract. This paper discusses the impact of resurgent nationalism on contemporary Japan-China security relations. It argues that rising domestic nationalist pressure as a result of “structural changes” in the bilateral relationship has instigated both Japan and China to re-evaluate their strategic perceptions and concerns toward each other in recent years. Indeed, the revival of nationalism against the backdrop of changing power dynamics in their bilateral ties have widened their “perception gap”, and exacerbated mutual suspicion and rivalry. Such developments have contributed to recent assertiveness and shifts in their mutual security policies that are fuelling a potential Japanese-Chinese security dilemma/arms race. Although few predict violent conflict between Japan and China, this paper contends that domestic nationalist pressure is increasingly constraining both governments’ pragmatic policy-options, especially when managing bilateral issues of nationalistic persuasions that persistently haunt diplomatic relations.

Keywords: Japan-China relations, nationalism, security policy, security dilemma

1. Introduction

Japan-China relations have long generated substantial interest from scholars and laymen, alike. It is a bilateral relationship that has been traditionally marked by sustained periods of volatility, conflict, and rivalry, despite their geographical proximity and social cultural affinities. Although flourishing economic interactions and deepening interdependence during the last few decades have somewhat resulted in more cordial diplomatic exchanges, the overall atmosphere of Sino-Japanese diplomacy remains, at best, lukewarm. Indeed, bilateral relations reached an unprecedented nadir during the spring of 2005, following the outbreak of massive anti-Japanese demonstrations across Chinese cities that equally triggered corresponding incidents of popular anti-Chinese reprisal in Japan (Roy 2005:191; Chan and Bridges 2006:128).

Experts commonly opine that political, socio-economic, and strategic transformation, or “structural changes” in both domestic and international realms have made contemporary Japan-China relations volatile (Kokubun 2006; Mori 2007; Lai 2008). Apparently, the revival of nationalism as a product of this “structural changes” has become a potent force redefining their national interests and external orientations, which concomitantly affected the bilateral relationship. According to observers, the noticeable shifts in Japanese and Chinese foreign/security policies have been as much, a strategic response to the structural transformations brought about by the Cold War’s demise, as a reflection of the ongoing domestic socio-political changes, where nationalism has become influential in shaping the public mood and domestic political debate. Media coverage of their current bilateral affairs has been unrestrained in blaming nationalism as the major culprit, while informed Japan-China watchers have consistently associated their fragile ties to strong nationalist undercurrents in both countries. Although few predict violent conflict between Japan and China, many contend that domestic nationalist pressure is increasingly constraining both

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governments' foreign policy-options, especially when managing nationalist-nuanced issues that persistently haunt diplomatic relations.

2. Resurgent Nationalism in Contemporary Japan and China

Rising nationalism in both countries has been the cause of the unraveling of various domestic and external factors, which have ignited the inherently double-edged force. In China, the necessity for a new ideological basis for regime legitimacy following the fall of global communism has encouraged the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime to consistently foster nationalism to promote national unity and political cohesion. Similarly, domestic and international achievements, in particular, China's thriving economic growth since the early 1990s and the country's coalescing rise in stature as a potential superpower have made the ordinary Chinese more confident, proud and markedly patriotic. Such developments, together with a few other "reactive" factors, have undoubtedly abetted the rise of broad-based Chinese nationalism.

Conversely, Japanese postwar nationalism gained currency during the 1960s to 1980s with the major impetus being the nation's near miraculous economic growth during that period. However, the burst of Japan's economic "bubble" in the early 1990s and its subsequent, prolonged economic malaise has severely undermined national confidence. Against such a background, a revival of nationalism, whether or not consciously stoked by the government, or stemming from the pent-up frustration of the Japanese people, was seen as a natural and inevitable process as the Japanese nation sought for a new source of self-identity in the so-called "lost decade" (Kase 09/08/2001). To be sure, Japan has periodically experienced outbreaks of nationalistic fervour, which in most instances, have been diluted and suppressed by the presence of a variety of pacifist structures and progressive forces within the government and society, that have sought to disassociate Japan from its militaristic past. However, the current surge of nationalism, which started during the mid-1990s has not received the usual attention and backlash from these opposition forces. A general feeling of insecurity over to the malignant economy and the North Korean missile threat, not mentioning, growing public apathy on the question of Japan's identity, has given a lot of leeway to the nationalist forces within and without the government to push forward their agenda.

3. Nationalism and Shifting Security Perceptions and Policies

Indeed, resurgent nationalism has affected the manner Japan manages its security relations with China. Amidst shifting power dynamics, rising nationalism has instigated one another's re-evaluation of strategic perceptions, and security concerns in recent years. Although it is in their mutual interest to forge a constructive and stable security relationship for the peace and stability of the region, both Japan and China are nevertheless wary of each others' security developments and intention, in part due to their relationship that is still very much in the shadows of the past, and also, their widening mutual perception gap and deepening suspicion towards one another. Specifically, Japan's neo-nationalist agenda for a "normal nation", which "stripped to its essence... simply means a nation that can go to war" (Samuels 2007a:128), has fuelled Chinese concerns about Japan's ever-expanding security role, and occasional paranoia regarding the revival of Japanese militarism. Conversely, neo-nationalism, borne from feelings of insecurity, has made Japan wary of China's spectacular economic and military development (Soerensen 2006:117), with Japanese defence planners increasingly echoing, albeit subtly, the "China threat" notion, popularly contrived by their hawkish Western counterparts, media, and commentators. One can construe that China's military modernisation plausibly reflects vigilance, and counter-balancing against Japan's evolving security agenda, while Japanese security policy-shifts are, partly driven by growing concerns over the emerging Chinese security challenge. Compounding their caginess are the unresolved East China Sea territorial/maritime disputes, the "Taiwan" dilemma in US-Japanese security arrangements, and nationalism's exacerbation of mutual mistrust. Regionally, their rising defence budgets and renewed rivalry are increasing the stakes in East Asian security, as they could undesirably escalate into a Japanese-Chinese arms race (Christensen 1999:69-71). As Green noted, these are "ingredients for a classic defense dilemma" between Japan and China (2001:93).

Such developments echo "middle-grounding" International Relations (IR) theories' assumption that domestic-ideational variables, i.e. historical grievances and nationalism, have the potency of aggravating security dilemmas under changing relative power dynamics and fluid external environment, such as the case

of Japan's post-Cold War relations with China (Christensen 1999). As highlighted, neo-nationalism's impact on the shifting Japanese security discourse and policies have brought a reconceptualisation of mainstream Chinese strategic thinking that perceives Japan as China's chief future security concern.¹ Indeed, the Chinese are aware that contemporary Japan has become more powerful and militarily prepared than it appears to be, or project, despite the constitutional constraints (Yang 2003:308). This include having among the world's largest military budgets, notwithstanding the strictly self-defence disposition of the Japan Self-Defence Force (JSDF)'s, and its reputation as a modern, highly sophisticated military boasting top-of-the-range hardware that technically allow Japan to project power far beyond its constitutional rights² (Yang 2003:308). The JSDF's continuous redefinition under a strengthened US-Japanese security alliance (Soerensen 2006) has aggravated Chinese security analysts' suspicion regarding Japan's intention to resurrect its military power status (Wang 2002:110). The Chinese also saw the US "war on terror"³ as an event that has facilitated Japan's rearmament and pursuance of a "normal state" identity (Yang 2003:309). They perceive Japan's rising security profile, and recent joint restructuring of US-Japanese forces as a move that ultimately targets China, with Tokyo becoming what Yu (1999:10) contends as the fulcrum of Washington's "containment by stealth" policy and grand strategy in East Asia, via their revitalised alliance (Tamamoto 2005/6).

Conversely, the Japanese saw their renewed security orientation as inevitable in view of the challenges imposed by the fluid post-Cold War environment. From the more immediate North Korean "threat" factor⁴ and global terrorism, to growing concerns regarding China's military development, and related ambitions in the Taiwan Strait and East China Sea, these uncertainties have driven Japan to rethink its national security, not mentioning, the relentless "allied" pressure to assume a more prominent international security role (Soerensen 2006:111). Another reason is that Japan seeks to become a "normal state", not only because of the need to be able to act normally in defending its national security interests, but also domestic nationalist pressure to redress national identity and international prestige, which have galvanised the transformation of the Japanese security agenda towards "normalisation" (Singh 2002:88). However, the issue is not so much about Japan becoming a "normal state", but whether China can accept a "normal", re-armed, and internationally pro-active Japan that would directly challenge its emerging regional influence, and possibly lead to power competition and rivalry for regional dominance (Wu 2000). Some Chinese observers even perceive Japan's drive towards "normalcy" as a nationalist pretext for reviving Japanese militarism (Roy 2003:4). Ideally, the Chinese would prefer Japan to be continuously "abnormal", or what Yahuda observes as a Japan that is, "politically and strategically quiescent until such time as presumably it would be overshadowed by China" (2006:169).

While Beijing worries about a nationalistic and assertive Japan, Japanese security analysts are wary of China's rise and emergence as "the security issue of the 21st century" (JFIR 1995). Tokyo's interest, according to observers, is to devise an adequate strategy to manage a rising, but unpredictable China. This includes developing durable ties, and helping the Chinese, avert potential domestic instability that could be detrimental to Japan's own security. Indeed, "China threat" to Japan is as much about China becoming a strong military anti-status quo power, as a weak China spawning regional instability (Shirk 2007). Hence,

¹ Indeed, over 60% of China's security planners foresaw Japan to be a potential major rival, as noted by David Shambaugh, back in the mid-1990s (1994:6; cf. Yang 2003:307).

² Japan's defence budget of over USD41 billion in FY2006 was "one of the five largest in the world" (Samuels 2007b:63). The JSDF also possesses power-projection capabilities that include what essentially is, a blue-water navy comprising submarines and Aegis-class destroyers at Yokosuka, Sasebo and Kobe, and an air-force of medium/long-range air-superiority fighter-aircrafts and airborne refueling capabilities (Roy 2003:2; Drifte 2003). Observers see such offensive-based weaponry as contradicting the JSDF's definition as a "self-defence force", and the Article IX (Wu 2000; Roy 2003; Hughes 2005).

³ Japan's security role has expanded unprecedentedly since the "9/11" incident. This includes the introduction of so-called "emergency legislations" like the "Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law" and the "Bill to Respond to Armed Attacks", which give Japan the flexibility to participate in military activities in conjunction with the US, and to initiate the use of force in respond to armed attacks (NIDS 2003). The subsequent dispatch of MSDF refuelling vessels to the Indian Ocean under *Operation Enduring Freedom* represented Japan's active participation in overseas military operations, for the first time since WWII. Tokyo also dispatched Ground-SDF personnel to support the US "coalition of the willing" in the postwar reconstruction of Iraq.

⁴ North Korea's security "threats" to Japan include its nuclear weapons programme, missile tests that expose Japan's lacklustre and inadequate security measures, incursions of *fushinsen*, and the emotionally-charged abduction issue, not mentioning Pyongyang's reputed anti-Japanese stance, belligerence, and lack of conformity to international norms and practices.

Japan's contemporary China policy has been to engage, while maintaining sufficient hedging measures to facilitate its emergence as a responsible power and stakeholder in regional security (Drifte 2003).

Nonetheless, domestic support for a policy of engagement has weakened following the worsening of Japanese perceptions/attitudes towards China resulting from rising nationalism, and apprehensions regarding Chinese emerging capabilities and intentions. Specifically, heightened anxiety over Chinese power, influence, and ambitions have elicited vocal complaints from nationalists/politicians regarding Japan's overly accommodative posture, and decreased Japanese confidence on the logic of economic interdependence engendering improved politico-security relations with the Chinese (Roy 2003:3; Yahuda 2006). According to Samuels, Japanese neo-nationalists of all hues, commonly view China as a "potential threat"; the realists focusing on the PLA's rising military challenge, whereas the neo-conservatives and neo-autonomists spice up the debate with a distinctively anti-Chinese flavour (2007a:146). Underpinning their security concerns have been the steady augmentation of Chinese military capabilities, marked by sustained double-digit annual defence expenditures, and the related lack of transparency in military decision-making and tendency to under-report actual spending (Drifte 2003:43; JT 07/02/2008). Bitzinger notes that most US assessments share the view that "China's official defense budget greatly under-represents actual military expenditure by a factor of two to three" (2003:1). The Chinese argue that their defence budget is comparatively lower to other developed countries, including Japan, and that the annual increase is mainly for the replacement of outdated hardware, and basic operating expenditure of its sizeable standing army (PD 05/03/2006). However, Japanese and US defence planners, alike, are aware that China is gradually shifting the military balance with its mass purchasing of sophisticated, power-projection weaponry and defence technologies from Russia, ranging from fighter-aircrafts, to submarines and destroyers, besides the development of indigenous defence production capacity (Bitzinger 2003; NIDS 2003). Complemented by the world's third largest nuclear arsenal and a rapidly advancing aerospace industry, China's defence spending trajectories have raised concerns regarding its intentions, as consistently noted in recent Japanese defence white papers (JDA 2005; 2006). Ironically, Japanese concerns, as Drifte contends, "would have been much less pronounced", if not for China's rapid economic growth (2003:43).

China's propensity to use force to advance its security interests, i.e. Vietnam (1979), the South China Sea archipelagos of Paracel (1975) and Spratly (1995), and most glaringly, during the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis also fuelled Japanese anxiety regarding potential Chinese belligerence, when managing their territorial/maritime disputes in the ECS. Beijing's forceful handling of the 2002 "Shenyang" incident further aggravated such concerns. Additionally, Japan is wary of China's intention to control sea-lanes crucial to its economic prosperity (Roy 2003:3). The PLA-Navy's metamorphosis into a blue-water navy and increased naval activities indicate Chinese ambition to achieve operational capacity in the South and East China Seas, where it may be able "to interdict shipping inbound to, or outbound from Japanese ports" (Roy 2003:3). Besides prioritising the development of its submarine force (Golstein and Murray 2004), the PLA-Navy's repeated vessel incursions into Japanese territorial waters for maritime/oceanographic research and alleged naval intelligence gathering operations since the late 1990s were, plausibly related to such ambitions (Roy 2003:3; Drifte 2003:56-57; NIDS 2002). Japan's security transformation is therefore, as much a response to alleviate anxieties about the strategic uncertainties posed by China, as to counter North Korea's cavalier attitude (Funabashi 2000:136). Japanese nationalists are also drumming up "China threat" to justify remilitarisation, and even the prospects of a nuclear-armed Japan to counter Chinese security challenges (Nakanishi 2003 cf. Samuels 2007a:fn.51).

Equally fuelling Japanese unease is the brazenly anti-Japanese nationalism flourishing in China. Tokyo is aware of Beijing's conspicuous promotion of anti-Japanese sentiment through education (Kawashima 2005:19-21) and other propaganda channels for domestic political expedience. Although the Chinese regime is pragmatic in stoking nationalism, and has had occasionally reined in popular sentiments, the decades of indoctrination and reminder of Japanese misdeeds have cultivated virulent anti-Japanese passion among China's younger generations. Such sentiment has manifested in popular anti-Japanese discourse, and demonstrations, like those in April 2005. Indeed, contemporary Chinese public opinion reflects a zealously nationalistic generation, whose frustrations are predominantly directed against Japan (Shirk 2007:151-152), exacerbating Japanese concerns regarding the perils of unrestrained Chinese nationalism, and Beijing's

ability to maintain a pragmatic Japan policy. It is rather ironic that contemporary Japanese insecurities vis-à-vis the Chinese mirror that of the Chinese towards their neighbour. While the Japanese are concerned about the potential security challenges of resurgent Chinese nationalism and a militarily powerful China, the Chinese are paranoid about the revived threats of Japanese nationalism and remilitarisation to their security interests (Roy 2003).

The Chinese have taken measures to soothe Japanese and neighbouring concerns, especially regarding the “China threat” perception. Besides publishing defence white papers, Beijing has actively recited the mantra of “peaceful rise” to reassure neighbours of its intention (Zheng 2005; Guo 2006). Chinese officials and media also fervently refuted Japanese perception, claiming that Japan’s defence white papers are misleadingly portraying China as a source of regional instability by exaggerating its military strength/spending (PD 03/08/2005; Wang 2002:115). Many of China’s “Japan” scholars/commentators perceive it as Japanese intention to sidetrack international attention from, and provide excuses for their own military development. They also place the blame of Japanese fixation with the “China threat” notion mostly on the workings of nationalists (CD 18/07/2001). There is an element of truth to such claims, as Japanese nationalists have indeed, sought to exploit worsening images of China in Japan to advance their agendas (Rozman 2002), and that contemporary Japanese nationalism is directed mainly at China. Such developments have undoubtedly encouraged a policy-shift vis-à-vis China “from commercial liberalism to reluctant realism” (Green and Self 1996:36).

The above analysis demonstrates nationalism’s aggravation of mutual security (mis)perceptions and concerns that encourage the reassessment of one another’s security policy, which serves to accentuate mutual suspicion and tension. However, it has not led Tokyo (and Beijing) to ruthlessly, pursue narrow, nationalist-oriented security goals irrespective of the broader national interests, or at the expense of the bilateral relationship. Moreover, in the age of interdependence, the traditional notions of security have broadened to include more holistic definitions, i.e. economic and environmental security, both of which are crucial to their respective conceptualisation of comprehensive national security. Japan, specifically, has sought to promote Chinese confidence, regarding its shifting security orientation. Although domestic nationalist demands have made Japan’s transformation into a “normal” state inevitable, rational Japanese policy-makers are cautious about letting nationalist agendas dominate their foreign/security policy deliberations, to the detriment of Japanese-Chinese ties. Understandably, pragmatic considerations for Japan’s economic vitality, and China’s moderate posturing in the regional security equation, and cooperation in both conventional and non-traditional security issues (i.e. environmental security) are high on Japanese comprehensive security calculus (Drifte 2003:70-76; Arase 2007). Additionally, domestic pacifist forces, though relatively weakened, remain sound in checking against, and moderating ultra-nationalist/militarist tendencies within the government. Furthermore, despite their apparent nationalistic dispositions, Japanese state-elites have exhibited political will to balance and maintain a degree of pragmatism in their management of sensitive bilateral security issues. Lastly, Japanese security policies remain constrained by the US-Japan alliance, and Washington’s overarching security agenda, a position that Beijing is, perhaps, more willing to countenance than a unilateral Japanese remilitarisation. Hence, Japan has been treading cautiously, pushing the national security reform agenda incrementally, while simultaneously reassuring China of its intentions. Tokyo has also been prudent in its official statements regarding China’s security developments, and has not openly subscribed to the “China threat” notion, as reflected by the “non-committal/carefully-worded” texts found in Japanese defence documents. Indeed, notwithstanding longer-term concerns, the overall Japanese perception of China is more of caution than actual fear, and security assessments consider the prospect of conflict with China as “entirely unlikely” in the immediate future” (Austin and Harris 2001:94).

4. Conclusion

This paper has elucidated how resurgent nationalistic impulses in contemporary Japan and China negatively affects ones’ security perceptions and policies vis-à-vis the other, against the backdrop of their changing power relations. Although both neighbours have thus far remained cautiously optimistic in their mutual security assessments, such optimism does not render the negative implications of domestic nationalist pressure on Japanese-Chinese impassable, especially when it comes to the East China Sea territorial/

maritime disputes, and more so regarding Taiwan. It is also uncertain as to how long such pragmatism could last against the backdrop of confrontational nationalisms that are expected to widen differences in their security interpretations, perceptions, and interests.

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