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Sino-Japanese Relations since the 1972 Normalization: Prospects for Conflict Resolution and Regional Hegemony

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the political, economic, and social relationships between China and Japan following the formal normalization of these relations in 1972 and subsequent decay during the past decade. Current issues such as Japan's foiled U.N. Security Council bid, underwater drilling rights, Taiwan, and growing nationalism within both countries are discussed. The primary findings in this paper argue that Sino-Japanese relations are in a precarious state and can be repaired only if Japan issues an all-encompassing formal reparation for the actions of its imperial army on its Asian neighbors during the 1930s and 1940s. After this last obstacle has been eradicated, China will finally fully embrace the possibility of an enhanced and mutually beneficial Sino-Japanese relationship.
Sino-Japanese Relations since the 1972 Normalization:
Prospects for Conflict Resolution and Regional Hegemony

In the past decade, the diplomatic relationship between China and Japan has been increasingly agitated by controversies initiated by both sides in an indirect race for regional hegemony in Asia. While major conflict has been avoided so far, if both nations continue to neglect the causes of these issues of dispute, the region could find itself in dire straights in the coming decades. While at times they cooperate and a shared occupancy of the seat of power on the Asian stage seems plausible, as was especially true in the 1970s and 1980s, the relationship between the two nations has recently become more fragile due to conflicts ranging from the future of Taiwan to emerging strong nationalistic sentiments in both countries. The purpose of this paper is to examine the historical, economical, and political events and issues that have affected Sino-Japanese relations since the normalization of relations in 1972, and to analyze these effects on current and future interaction.

Historical Background of Normalization

In 1931 the Japanese occupied Manchuria, the first of their many conquests in Asia. By 1937, the Japanese imperial army had overpowered much of China including Chahar, Hopeh, Peking, Shanghai, and Nanking. Most infamous of these invasions was the capture of Nanking. After seizure of the city in December
1937, the Japanese army began a massacre of the population which included civilian men, women, and children. Estimates of the death toll range from 250,000 to 350,000 persons (Chang, 1997). This number far exceeds the casualties sustained in both Nagasaki and Hiroshima combined. In addition to execution, there was widespread torture and rape of the Chinese civilians during the weeks of the massacre. During Japan’s 15-year military occupation of various Asian countries, an estimated 10-30 million people including POWs and forced laborers, died of a myriad of causes ranging from execution to starvation (Chang, 1997).

Another major atrocity by Japan against its Asian neighbors involves the imperial military’s use of sex slaves, commonly referred to as comfort women, during the occupation. Approximately 200,000 women from countries such as China, Philippines, Malaysia, and Korea, were manipulated or kidnapped by the Japanese and forcibly raped countless times (Brook, 2001). After the Japanese surrender during WWII, many of these women were killed or abandoned and subsequently died of starvation. The experiences of the surviving women were almost entirely overlooked by historians until the 1990s when some women began to come forward with their stories (Brook, 2001). In the years following WWII, relations between Japan and China were almost nonexistent.

In the early 1970s, several developed nations began endeavors to establish diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China in Beijing. On February
21, 1972 US President Richard Nixon embarked on his weeklong “ice-breaking” visit to the PRC (“Backgrounder,” 2002). Japan quickly followed suit that same year by sending Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei to China to discuss terms of normalization with Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-Lai (Kawashima, 2003). The fruits of this historic meeting were manifested in the September 29 signing of the 1972 Sino-Japanese Joint Statement which officially normalized Sino-Japanese relations (Kim, 1975). The statement also made provisions for the eventual signing of an official peace treaty between China and Japan (Kawashima, 2003).

At this time, Japan “expressed regret for the sufferings inflicted on China before 1945” (Beasley, 2000, p. 241). China, in turn, relinquished “any claim to a war indemnity” (Beasley, 2000, p. 242). China’s conditions for the Sino-Japanese reconciliation also called for the “recognition of the People’s Republic as the sole legal government of China, acceptance of Taiwan as an inalienable part of the territory of the People’s Republic, and abrogation of Japan’s peace treaty with the Nationalists” (Hsiao, 1974, p. 721). As a result, any formal recognition or contract by Japan in regard to Taiwan as an entity separate from China was deemed null.

Following the formal normalization of relations, the remainder of Sino-Japanese relations throughout the 1970s was focused on cultivating trade between the two nations as well as developing bilateral administrative arrangements which dealt with a variety of issues such as civil aviation and fisheries (Kim, 1975). In
August of 1978, after years of negotiations and the death of Mao Tse-tung, an official peace treaty, the Sino-Japanese Peace and Friendship Treaty, was approved. Most of the negotiations concerning the treaty dealt with China's insistence on including an anti-hegemony clause. Japan was wary of such inclusion because of the implications it would have on relations with Moscow, who would no doubt interpret it as being directed toward the Soviet Union. However a compromise was made after both parties agreed on a diluted version of the anti-hegemony clause (Kim, 1975).

This treaty and similar agreements between the two countries made at this time were ambitious in their provisions for a strong and prosperous China/Japan relationship. For example, a six-year trade agreement signed in February of 1978 made provisions for impressive exchanges of Chinese oil and Japanese machinery. However, China eventually failed to meet the lofty petroleum quotas (Wang, 1993). This pattern of initial high-ceiling expectations and later disappointment can be transposed from the trade sector to diplomatic bilateral relations on the whole from the honeymoon of normalization in the 1970s and 1980s and subsequent breakdown during the 1990s.

Nature of Relationship during the 1980s

The 1980s were marked by amplification of bilateral contact between the two nations. Although not at the astronomical rate initially predicted in the 1970s, trade boomed. While bilateral trade was just over a billion dollars in the
early 1970s, in 1981 it had reached almost ten billion (Wang, 1993). By the early 1980s, Japan was China's largest source of credit, contributing almost fifteen billion US dollars. Trade during this time also became diversified from the initial patterns of Chinese raw energy for Japanese machinery (Wang 1993).

Fluctuating Public Opinion within China and Japan

Many people, although not blind to the past, were optimistic about the future of the increasingly interconnected nations. They viewed the formal normalization of 1972 as the first step of a close relationship between the Asian nations. Some scholars even proposed the formation of a bond like the one shared by Germany and France. Various public opinion polls in both countries illustrate the attitudes of the masses in the two nations. While in 1980, 79% of Japanese polled harbored friendly feelings toward China, after the June 1989 Tiananmen Square catastrophe during which student protestors were violently suppressed under orders from the Chinese government, 40% of Japanese responded that they now looked upon their Asian neighbor in an unfriendly manner (Kawashima, 2003).

Trends in Relations during the 1990s

Public opinion continued a downward spiral throughout the 1990s. The highpoint of relations during this period probably came during Emperor Akihito’s 1992 visit to China. Events such as the renegotiation of Japan’s US security
alliance and China’s ambitious forays into Japanese territory fed the fires of resentment between the two nations.

Although diplomatic relations between the nations often seemed to be strained during the 1990s, trade relations continued to skyrocket, becoming five times larger during the decade (Kawashima, 2003).

China’s Growing Economy and Status (1970-Present)

When evaluating the fluctuating relationship between China and Japan since normalization, it is vital that one examine the extreme economic, political, and ideological changes experienced by the two nations over the past three decades. China’s incredible economic explosion is incredibly significant and merits consideration in any discussion of Sino-Japanese relations.

during the past two decades, that progress was not wrought without sacrifices.

Critics suggest that economic and social security, income equality and the quality of the environment have all been casualties of post-1978 reforms Chinese economic development as a whole exploded during the 1980s and 1990s, however it should be noted that it was irregular and sporadic, and has left scars on the modern day PRC ("The Chinese Economy," 1992).

Nationalistic Trends in Asia during Past Decade

Within the past decade, recent trends, most notably towards nationalism, have been sweeping Asia. The motivation behind this move towards the unification of the population is often a direct result of opposition to a neighboring country. For example, large groups of Chinese have drawn together and trumpeted their national identity when they found a common transgressor in the form of a Japanese action or event. The April 2005 protests and vandalizing of Japanese-owned property attest to that phenomenon (Jennings, 2005).

The decline of the Soviet Union left a conspicuous void in Asia; one that both Japan and China seem intent on filling. While some naively speculated that the two powers would cooperate and jointly become the major leaders of the region, in reality they have been butting heads, both trying to out-muscle the other in a quest for control.
Recent Growth of Nationalism within China

As China continues to blossom, the motivating ideology of its people and government is continuously adapting itself. China's middle class is emerging and defining itself while the participation by capitalists in the government is changing the philosophy of the nation. Nationalism has increasingly replaced communism; a trend which is being nervously monitored by the administration in Beijing ("Wen Seeking," 2002). This new nationalism is evident in the bolder foreign policy of China that has been surfacing over the past decade (Wang, 2005). Many cite former Chinese President Jiang Zemin's pursuit of a "patriotic education" for China that more or less translated as anti-Japanese sentiments ("Wen Seeking," 2002). Critics accuse China of nurturing anti-Japanese sentiment to stifle and prevent anti-government protests. Nationalism has been recently boosted even more by China's successful 2008 Olympic bid. As previously mentioned, nationalistic sentiment was also visible during the protests against Japan in April (Jennings, 2005).

Trends Toward Nationalism in Japan

These new nationalistic sentiments are not unique to China. Japan too, in the past decade has experienced a revival of nationalism. Chief Asia correspondent for London's Financial Times, Victor Mallet, observes:

The newly assertive mood – expressed in films and manga comic books as well as in a directive from the Tokyo Board of Education requiring teachers to stand in front of the Rising Sun flag at school ceremonies and sing the
imperial national anthem – has worsened Japan’s relations with the rest of Asia. (p. 17)

Fueling the fire, Koizumi made yet another visit to the controversial Yasukuni shrine in October 2005. Since Koizumi announced that he has no intentions of seeking another term as prime minister after his expires in September 2006, there has been much speculation over who will succeed him. Shinzo Abe, currently cited as the most popular potential candidate, is staunchly nationalistic, as is Taro Aso, another likely candidate (“Koizumi’s Last,” 2005). The popularity of these candidates among the Japanese is a testament to the general public’s support and attitudes concerning a revival in nationalism for Japan.

State of Present Sino-Japanese Relations

Several recent events seem aimed to move Japan from a constitutionally-pacifist nation to what Prime Minister Koizumi calls a “normal country,” capable of a more “international role for Tokyo and the revision of the pacifist Constitution to acknowledge the country’s considerable armed forces” (Sieff, 2005). Many Japanese leaders’ latest stances and actions concerning issues including Japan’s Self Defense Forces, the Taiwan issue, ODA reform, and controversies dealing with Japan’s wartime past have triggered intense reactions from China and other Asian neighbors.
Remilitarization of Japan

In late October 2005, the Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee made up of U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Japanese Defense Agency Director General Yoshinori Ono, and Japanese Foreign Miniltere Nobutaka Machimura, announced an agreement which will increase the cooperation between U.S. forces and Japanese Self Defense Forces. Ono called this arrangement a “historic process” and declared that the “Japanese government was ready to expand the Japanese Self Defense Forces’ role to engage in joint defense activities with U.S. forces” (Sieff, 2005). An example of the possibilities of such joint defense projects would be using Japanese-generated radar information to discharge interceptor missiles from U.S. destroyers. “Concrete implementation schedules” for the joint activities will completed by March 2006 (Sieff, 2005).

These developments, which increase the participation of the Japanese in missile defense systems in Asia, continue the trend of raising eyebrows in regard to the Japanese Constitution, in particular Article 9. Also referred to as the peace clause, Article 9 prohibits Japan from participating in “collective self-defense” (Alford, 2005). Additionally, the U.S. and Japan also reached an agreement reducing the number of U.S. marines stationed in Japan from 14,500 to 7,500 over the course of six years. Much of the personnel will be relocated to the U.S. territory of Guam (Alford, 2005).
Japan is pursuing development of its own ballistic military defense (BMD) system. Aware of China’s apprehension of such capabilities, Japanese officials generally favor the term BMD over theater missile defense (TMD) systems which carry a connotation of regional use as opposed to strictly defense. In regard to Chinese criticism, Japan is also quick to clarify that any BMD system is exclusively for Japan’s protection, and will not be used in the event of disputes between the PRC and Taiwan (Mochizuki, 2001). The “defensive nature” of BMD is well-suited to Japan and is less liable to incite an arms race with China (Arase, 2001, p. 6).

Implications of Taiwan on Sino-Japanese Relations

Since 1996, missiles have been deployed from China toward Taiwan’s southeast coastline. Taiwanese president Chen Shui-bian estimates over 700 such tests have been carried out, with almost 100 being conducted annually in recent years (Reilly, 2005). Amphibious military drills by the Chinese have also occurred in the region, fueling speculation that an invasion of Taiwan by the Chinese is imminent (Reilly, 2005). This October 2005 marks the 60th anniversary of Taiwan’s return to China after being held by Japan for 50 years. In an unusual move, Beijing held massive celebrations marking this anniversary. However, the festivities and parades masked a covert message to Taiwan from the mainland: Taiwan is an inalienable part of the PRC. This message echoed the sentiment expressed in the passing of the Anti-secession Law in March 2005 (Ahmed, 2005).
This legislation pre-approved non-peaceful measures to be taken if Taiwan formally moved towards independence. Although the anniversary celebrations were directed towards Taiwan, the traces of anti-Japanese sentiment in mainland China associated with the events leading up to the return of the country in 1945 were evident (Ahmed, 2005).

During the past decades, Japan maintained a vague policy about its actions in the event of Taiwan taking further steps towards independence. At the time of normalization, Japan formally recognized Beijing as the only government; since then any relations with the Taiwanese government have been through unofficial intermediaries (Kawashima, 2003). Japan’s close relationship with the United States indirectly implicates it with the United State’s actions in regard to Taiwan. Beijing is all-too aware of the role Japan would play if the United States were to physically support a move by Taiwan toward full independence.

Status of Japanese ODA to China

Japan’s financial aid to China in the form of Official Development Assistance (ODA) is another recent area of conflict. When relations between the two nations were normalized in 1972, China decided to forego any demands for reparations from Japan in lieu of receiving economic assistance (Wang, 1993). Since 1972, Japan has been China’s largest supplier of ODA in the form of low-interest loans, grants, etc. Japan’s total aid to China exceeds 33 billion dollars (“Japan minister,” 2005).
The recent concerns Japan has voiced to China concerning ODA deal with three major issues. First, the very existence of ODA originating in Japan is rarely publicized in China. Consequently, the majority of the people are not aware of their neighbor nation’s contribution, and are therefore deemed ungrateful by the Japanese ("Japan minister," 2005). Another note of discord pertains to China’s own ODA contributions to other countries. Japan reasons that if China can offer assistance to other nations, current aid into China is unnecessary ("It’s time to end," 2004). Last, Japan has expressed disapproval of China’s recent ballooning military and defense expenditures, as well as the general opacity of China’s budgets. Although China’s military budget is cited as only 20% of that of the United States’, Japanese public opinion is suspicious of the recent increases and questions its own financial contributions China (Mazzetti, 2005). Japanese Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura announced in March 2005 that ODA to China in the form of low-interest rate yen loans would cease in 2008 ("Japan minister," 2005).

Controversial Interpretations of History

Several other current issues of debate between the two countries also have roots in early and mid-twentieth century history. The horrendous acts of violence committed by Japanese troops on the Chinese in the 1940s is frequently recapped by Beijing in modern Sino-Japanese discourse. These wounds have not been
opened by China indiscriminately though. Several episodes initiated by Japan have served as catalysts for reopening heated discussion of the past.

Yasukuni Shrine Debate

The October 2005 visit to the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo marked the fifth time that Prime Minister Koizumi has made the trip to the memorial which honors Japan’s 2.5 million war casualties as well as 14 class-A war criminals (Yuan, 2005). Especially controversial is the Yasukuni museum’s stance on the massacre at Nanjing. “Residents were once again able to live their lives in peace,” the exhibit says of the effects of Japanese actions in the region (Onishi, 2005, p. A4). To the chagrin of Asian neighbors, most notably China and South Korea, Koizumi’s repeated formal visits to Yasukuni in the capacity of the nation’s leader, serve as pep rallies for the growing nationalistic sentiments in Japan. As issues of controversy between Japan and China become more numerous and well-publicized, peoples’ ways of viewing themselves and the opposing country are gaining teeth.

Nationalist Japanese Textbooks Controversy

In addition to the prime minister’s visits to Yasukuni, other events related to Japan’s militaristic past have been constant stumbling blocks in relations between Japan and China during the past few years. For example, after junior high and high school textbooks produced by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform were approved for use by the Japanese education ministry in
April 2005, China and South Korea both protested loudly. They claim that the books, controversial within Japan as well, were overly nationalistic, ignoring Japan’s militaristic past and wrongs against its Asian neighbors. Critics lament the textbook’s dearth of entries dealing with subjects such as wartime sex slavery and the Nanjing massacre (“China says,” 2005).

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao claim that adoption of these books by Japanese school systems will, “inevitably mislead and poison teenagers” (“China says,” 2005). Following the endorsement of the books by the Japanese government in April, large protests were staged in China, ending with the vandalizing of Japanese-owned businesses in China. Protestors also threw rocks and debris at the Japanese embassy; the Chinese police on hand made no attempt to stop the destructive demonstrations. Although the Chinese government eventually banned such protests, the dawdling pace of Beijing’s reaction was heavily criticized by Tokyo (Jennings, 2005). “Strong responses from the Asian people should make the Japanese government reflect deeply and profoundly,” Chinese Premier Wen instead said in the days immediately following the protests (“Wen Seeking,” 2005).

Japan’s U.N. Security Council Bid

Another point of dissension between the two nations is Japan’s thwarted bid for a permanent U.N. Security Council seat. Leading the opposition to this bid, China, a permanent member of the council, played the history card,
passionately reviving memories of Japan’s aggression throughout Asia in the mid-twentieth century ("Wen Seeking," 2005). Only three Asian nations, Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Maldives, supported Japan’s bid. As a result, Japan has seemingly lost any chance of obtaining the seat, and public opinion of the U.N. and China within Japan has plummeted. In October Japan’s ambassador to the U.N., Toshiro Ozawa, issued a statement in regard to Japan’s mounting frustration with the international organization, “Japan is obligated to pay an assessed contribution that far exceeds the sum of the contributions made by four out of the five permanent members of the Security Council”(Kakuchi, 2005). Former head of the United Nations University in Tokyo, Professor Takeshi Inoguchi, predicts that as Japan prepares its budget for the coming years, the dues paid to the United Nations will be reduced by as much as ten percent. Japanese frustration with the United Nations appears to be rooted in deep resentment of China’s role in sabotaging the security seat bid.

East China Sea Oil Conflict

Another major area of international discrepancy lies at the bottom of the East China Sea. Rich oil and gas deposits have been claimed by both Japan and China. According to Japan, the deposits overlap the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of both countries. However, China recognizes different EEZ borders, and thus argues that the area is neutral. Therefore the Chinese deem it open to exploitation, and are currently drilling in the disputed area. ("Oil and Gas," 2005).
While several rounds of talks have been held, no progress has been made.

Sentiments have been agitated by the staunch military presence China has dispatched to monitor the area. In late October, another round of talks was cancelled by China in response to Koizumi’s most recent shrine visit.

It seems that the conflict over the natural gas and oil fields comes down to pride on the parts of both nations. Although the “supposed 7 trillion cubic feet of natural gas and close to 100 billion barrels of oil” (Hall, 2005, p. 58) is an attractive lure, transportation of the resources back to Japan is difficult, and interested companies might be hard to come by, especially if there is a significant risk of damaging international relations.

Conclusions

With so many potential catalysts hovering in the horizon of Sino-Japanese international relations, is it just a matter of time before these wars of words escalate into serious military or economic conflict? China must contend with the daunting military alliance between Japan and the United States; any action against Japan would provoke an undesirable response from across the Pacific. Japan must also weigh its options carefully, are both the government and people prepared to finally stand up against China?

China has recently surpassed the United States as Japan’s largest trading partner. While the entrenched economic interdependency of the two nations will likely prevent complete breakdown of relations or perhaps even war, the inability
of either side to commit completely to the resolution of the disagreements discussed in this paper is detrimental to the entire region’s growth.

As a Japanese-American descendent of American WWII internees, I am especially interested in Japan’s reaction to the region’s demands for reparation. While it may be too late for Japan to follow Germany’s footsteps of steep financial compensation, I believe that for the sake of regional concord, Japan should thicken its verbal apologies into something tangible to satiate the anti-Japanese dogma of China. Only after this issue is settled will the playing table be evened and negotiations made possible without the ominous history card resurfacing again.

I believe that Japan has been reluctant to make such reparations due to the general lack of guilt felt by the population. Many Japanese see themselves as victims of WWII, reinforcing that claim with memories of the victims of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. The youth especially, often misinformed as to the imperialist past of Japan, see reparations as unnecessary and detrimental to the nationalistic trends of modern Japan. Japanese point to the massive ODA contributions and maintain that enough has already been done to help the Chinese. Popular Japanese sentiment is that any further apologies or financial amends will only weaken Japan in the eyes of its Asian neighbors. In my opinion, Japan should swallow its pride, and strive to summon a final, all-encompassing, and perhaps financially backed, admission of guilt, thereby eliminating the roadblock to Asian cooperation.
Perhaps after this conciliatory move by Japan, China will dilute its opaque facade and work for a close, mutually-beneficial relationship with its neighbor.
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