

FRICITION IN JAPAN-CHINA RELATIONS

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CAUSES AND CHALLENGES

Introduction

Because of its location, Japan has an array of unique neighbors, though not all of them hold a warm attitude toward the country. China is one such example — the recent actions of the Chinese government pertaining to the Senkaku Islands, its growing military might, and the country's hegemonic aspirations are all reasons why the Japanese Ministry of Defense classifies China as the biggest current threat to Japan. Given the facts that Japan is one of the United States' most strategic allies and China is the biggest threat to the United States' superpower status, it becomes more important than ever to better understand the history and the future of relations between the two countries. This piece explores various causes of Japan-China tensions and the strategic challenges that China poses to Japan.

A History of Tensions

Tension between Japan and China can be traced back to the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Second World War, in which Imperial Japanese forces committed horrendous war crimes such as the mass murder and mass rape of the residents of Nanking, China's then capital. This event, known as the "Rape of Nanjing," resulted in between 100,000 to 300,000 deaths. This war crime stirs up strong emotions among Chinese people because Japan actively downplays its severity in their textbooks. As Merkel-Hess and Wasserstrom write in "Nanjing by the Numbers,"

"For years, there have been some historians in Japan moving toward a more moderate position on Nanjing, but there have also been periodic efforts by Japanese officials to sidestep or minimize the issue of Japanese culpability and misbehavior, their sentiments echoed by a small number of textbooks authorized for use in Japan's classrooms. Japanese leaders have historically ignored pleas to acknowledge fully the extent to which Japan was responsible for Pacific War-era devastation and violence not just in China but also in Korea, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia."



The most notable instance of outcry from the Chinese against these historic Japanese atrocities, and Japan's attempts to whitewash them, came in 2005. As Qiu writes in her paper, "The Politics of History and Historical Memory in China-Japan relations,"

"The emotional crowd shouted anti-Japanese slogans and threw stones at the buildings of the embassy compound. Protests soon spread to nearly forty major cities, from Shanghai and Guangzhou in the south, to Zhengzhou and Chongqing in central China, and to Tianjin and Shenyang in the north."

Contested Territory

Tensions between Japan and China are not only limited to the past and how it is represented in the Japanese culture but also extend to the realm of geopolitical security. Ever since 1895, Japan has been in administrative control of the Senkaku Islands, a group of islands about 410km west of Okinawa Island. However, during the 1970s, China started asserting its own claim over the islands, which it calls the Diaoyu Islands. It is important to note that the islands are a potentially rich reserve of oil and natural gas. They are also surrounded by fishing areas and are in a prime location for trading, making it unsurprising that both countries also lay claim to the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) surrounding the islands. Since the countries EEZs overlap, issues arose in 1995 when China discovered natural gas in the region and wanted to set up a drill, but Japan raised strong objections. In 2012, tensions over the islands peaked once again, when Japan decided to buy three of the islands from a private owner. In a subsequent move, China set up an “air defense identification zone” (ADIZ) over the island airspace, which essentially meant that they hijacked it by establishing complete dominance over the aircraft passing through the ADIZ.

This island dispute has implications that extend beyond the realm of international geopolitics, into the domestic environments of the countries. During the 2012–2013 period of heightened tensions, China witnessed a surge in anti-Japanese sentiment among its citizens. This eventually took the form of widespread anti-Japanese protests throughout China. In many places, these protests turned violent. The Chinese government’s reaction is best encapsulated in the following excerpt from a New York Times article: “A signed editorial on the Web site of People’s Daily, the authoritative Communist Party newspaper, said the protests should be viewed sympathetically. While it did not defend the violence, the editorial said the protests were a symbol of the Chinese people’s patriotism.”



The Feasibility of Conflict

The most notable aspect of the Japan-China island tension is that neither side wants to engage the other in a direct armed conflict. Michael Bosack, a special adviser at the Yokosuka Council on Asia-Pacific Studies in Japan, says, “China wants to change the status quo, but it does not want a military confrontation. The problem here is that miscalculation may lead to confrontation and/or escalation.” Bosack is absolutely right, especially about the latter half of his statement. Given the rise in tensions with China, Japan has started to build up its naval and air force bases on Okinawa Island. Japan has also opened new bases on Miyako Island and the islands toward Taiwan, which host anti-ship and surface-to-air missile batteries, as well as radar and intelligence-gathering facilities. An arms build-up due to China’s provocative actions could usher both of the countries into a conflict spiral in which each country responds to the other country’s actions with increased aggressiveness in each subsequent response cycle. If this happens and the situation evolves into a full-blown armed conflict, the United States would have to come to Japan’s defense because of the post-World War II agreement in which the United States pledged to defend Japan against any external military aggression in exchange for Japan adopting a pacifist constitution and hosting multiple American military bases on its soil. With over eighty military bases, Japan hosts more American military personnel than any other foreign country. Any threat posed to Japan by China is a direct threat to the United States’ strategic and military interests as well. This could very well become the proximate cause of the Third World War.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Sino-Japanese tensions date back to as early as the Second World War, when the Imperial Japanese Army committed horrendous war crimes against the Chinese. The fact that Japan downplays its involvement in these crimes in their textbooks infuriates the Chinese. This, in turn, has led to widespread anti-Japanese sentiment in China which ultimately manifested in the form of the 2005 anti-Japanese protests in China. Other than historical events, the Senkaku Island dispute builds up tensions between the countries on a geopolitical level. Both the countries lay claim to the islands and have recently taken part in arms build-up around them, which seems to be evolving into a conflict spiral. This situation could lead to an intervention by the United States, and, potentially, a Third World War. ■

