



## Obama's Japan Visit and US-Japan-China Relations: A Missed Opportunity for Conflict Prevention オバマ訪日と米日中関係 紛争阻止の機会逃す Apr. 26, 2014

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Most impartial observers of the China-Japan imbroglio over tiny islands claimed by both in the East China Sea—known in Japan as Senkaku and in China as Diaoyu—believe it has reached a dangerous point. The importance of the dispute is essentially two-fold. First, historical memory counts heavily in China-Japan relations. Despite their wide and deep economic ties in terms of trade, investment, and (at one time) Japanese development assistance, the dislike between peoples and governments is palpable. The Chinese are unrelenting in demanding Japanese apologies for aggression in World War II and insisting that Japanese political leaders stop behavior (notably, visiting the Yasukuni Shrine for war dead and endorsing school textbooks that elide such fraught issues as the Nanjing Massacre and the military “comfort women” system of sexual slavery) that suggests a lack of contrition. The Japanese say they have apologized enough and have every right to honor those who have served the country and display patriotic symbols.

Second, energy economics is very important in the dispute. Abundant oil and natural gas deposits apparently lie below the surface—by one US estimate, between 60 and 100 million barrels of oil and 1-2 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves (US Energy Information Administration, September 25, 2012 [www.eia.gov/countries/regions-topics.cfm?fips=ecs](http://www.eia.gov/countries/regions-topics.cfm?fips=ecs)). China and Japan are among the world's top energy consumers and importers. Either a boundary agreement or an agreement to share resources must take place before extensive drilling further heightens tensions.

President Obama has forfeited an opportunity to influence the course of the China-Japan dispute. Before, during, and at the end of his trip, he not only reiterated the US position, adopted in 1971 as it prepared for reversion of Okinawa to Japan, that “administrative rights” over the islands belong to Japan even though sovereignty remains undetermined. He also reaffirmed the interpretation that Article 5 of the US-Japan Security Treaty binds the United States to protect Japanese claims to the Senkakus along with the rest of the Ryukyu island chain. (Nothing was mentioned publicly about longstanding US use of two atolls in the Senkakus as a firing range.) And Obama applauded the notion that Japan should play a larger security role in Asia-Pacific, saying (in a written response to questions from Yomiuri Shimbun) that he agreed with Prime Minister Abe Shinzo on the need to “deepen the coordination between our militaries, including by reviewing existing limits on the exercise of collective self-defense,” and hoped Japan’s military would “do more within the framework of our alliance” (<http://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0001227627>).

The Joint Statement published as Obama’s visit concluded only mentioned China once—a throwaway line: “The United States and Japan recognize that China can play an important role in addressing all of these challenges [in the Middle East and Ukraine], and both countries reaffirm their interest in building a productive and constructive relationship with China” ([www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/25/us-japan-joint-statement-united-states-and-japan-shaping-future-asia-pac](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/04/25/us-japan-joint-statement-united-states-and-japan-shaping-future-asia-pac)). The document thus confirmed to one and all not only that the United States is hardly neutral on the territorial dispute, but also that a tighter US-Japan alliance is the preferred strategy for dealing with China. Serious problems lie ahead for both US-China and China-Japan relations and the peace of the Asia-Pacific region.

What Obama *should have done* is rein in Prime Minister Abe, a nationalist leader who seems bent on making Japan into a “normal nation” – one with a stronger military less bound by constitutional restrictions. Obama should have clarified to Tokyo that the US security umbrella over Japan does *not* give Abe carte blanche to “defend” the Senkakus, and that the US-Japan alliance is best served by finding a diplomatic resolution of the territorial dispute. Although Abe has said more than once that he is open to talking with Chinese leaders about the islands, most of his signals have been in the other direction—insisting that Japanese sovereignty is incontrovertible, visiting Yasukuni Shrine, calling for constitutional revision to legitimize a stronger military, and increasing Japan’s defense budget.

Abe has given China’s hawks a perfect excuse not just for closing the door to negotiations with Japan and declaring an air defense zone over the island area, but also for framing the issue as part of the US “pivot” to Asia and containment of China. Unless Washington can restrain Abe, Chinese and Japanese coast guard vessels and surveillance aircraft will step up their activities, raising the prospect of the United States becoming militarily involved in Japan’s defense. Even short of that, China-US relations will take a severe hit if Sino-Japanese tensions increase. That would be most unfortunate inasmuch as Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel’s recent visit to China seemed to expand opportunities for military-to-military relations.

These circumstances underscore just how strongly Cold War alignments and strategic thinking continue to exert significant influence over international relationships in East Asia, even after four decades of close US-China economic, financial and investment ties. All parties need to take a step back and dampen the hostile rhetoric. One Japanese analyst, Kazuhiko Togo, a former senior foreign ministry official long involved in negotiations with the Soviet Union over the Northern Islands, has suggested (in *Asian Perspective*, vol. 38, No. 2 (2014), forthcoming, <http://journals.rienner.com/loi/aspr>) that China agree not to enter the waters around the islands, that Japan agree not to build or otherwise occupy the islands, and that the two governments work on confidence-building measures to create trust. Agreement on a code of conduct governing maritime affairs, which the April 25 Joint Statement urged, should be part of the package, since it would make the use of force much less likely than is now the case. Mark Valencia has suggested other steps in conflict prevention, including Japan’s acknowledgement that a dispute exists, separation of the sovereignty issue from the boundary issue (shelving competing sovereignty claims, as Deng Xiaoping once proposed), and a freeze on further drilling until a new joint development agreement or agreement to joint development in a specified section of waters is reached (Mark J. Valencia, “The East China Sea Disputes: History, Status, and Ways Forward,” *Asian Perspective*, vol. 38, No. 2 (2014), forthcoming, <http://journals.rienner.com/loi/aspr>).

Both countries need to return to the period in 2008-2009 when talks on resource sharing in the disputed area were productive. Had US plans for “rebalancing” forces in Asia and the Chinese fishing trawler incident in September 2010 not occurred, leaders in Beijing and Tokyo might have been less constrained to carry on

toward an agreement. As matters stand, we have strong-willed decisionmakers in both capitals and foreign-policy specialists who are uncompromising in their support of their government's position on the territorial dispute. A welcome exception on the Chinese side is Shi Yinhong ("Strategic Policy Adjustments and Sino-Japanese Relations," *China-US Focus*, April 1, 2014, [www.chinausfocus.com/print/?id=36863](http://www.chinausfocus.com/print/?id=36863)). His sensible recommendations for lowering China-Japan tensions include reducing the frequency of air and sea patrols, restoring "moderately high level diplomatic contacts," and moderating media coverage of China's military buildup.

Chinese leaders should recognize how much their country's economic future is linked with that of Japan and the US, and Japanese leaders should remind themselves of the central importance for the region of positive China-US relations. A major part of that reevaluation for Beijing and Tokyo must include putting aside the dispute over the historical record of the islands and the unfortunate history of China-Japan relations in general. This is no time for self-righteousness or for grandstanding to satisfy nationalistic publics—the right wing in Japan and netizens in China. The United States is party to the dispute, and should not let the alliance with Japan stand in the way of China-Japan dialogue.

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