

# Sino-japan relations: fishmongers or warmongers

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Isaac Newton's third law addresses that for every action, there is an equal or opposite reaction – and throughout history, this notion has exemplified the Sino-Japanese relations. On 7 September 2010, Chinese fishing boat captain Zhan Qixiong collided with two Japanese Coast Guard vessels near the islands in the East China Sea. This resulted in the Japanese action of his arrest which has revived tensions prompting a political reaction from China which has potentially has serious regional repercussions.

This paper develops on the horizon of the East China Sea where Japan and China both have their own boundary claims to it. The foundation will set the scene of the territorial disputes: the Pinnacle (in English) or Diaoyu (in Chinese) or Senkaku (in Japanese) islands. Followed by the introduction of five primary pillars which argue their 'crimes' of acting as a contributing catalyst to this conflict by exploring actions made by each government. Last but not least, the second part will discuss the factors that may determine a dateline as to whether this matter will be resolved soon or possible even never.

To begin with, Zhan Qixiong was within Japanese custody from the 7 September 2010 because he was deemed to have crossed over the 'boundary line'. After three weeks of diplomatic rows, protests and public demonstrations, the Japanese government finally released Chinese fishing boat captain Zhan Qixiong to the Chinese authorities. With the history between these two powers Zhan's detention could ignite in China – and it did.

Interestingly the ' fire' could have set off even earlier. In June 2008, a Taiwanese fishing vessel sank after it collided with a Japanese coast guard. The crew involved was released with an apology from Japanese officials but the damage may have already been dealt. Since the event, each armed forces have been increasing their naval and aerial presence in the area which has led to several military stand offs.

For the last 120 years, the islands have been administered by Japan. Since United Nations investigation in 1969 indicated the possibility of oil and gas reserves in the surrounding waters around the islands, both sides have ratcheted up their claims which have become more intense in the past few years.

From the Japanese front, there were attempts to build constructs on the island (including a helipad). Likewise in response, there were various attempts by the Chinese nationals to land on the islands including the death of a Hong Kong man in 1996. Both have also argued on the right over the Chunxiao Gas fields and while they recently agreed to jointly develop the gas fields, Zhan's detention has led to a suspension in these talks.

Essentially this brings us to the foremost pillar – Japan's misstep in handling regional affairs. Upon detaining Zhan, it was stated that he will be investigated to the extent of Japanese domestic law. Yet this was unlikely the central case. An official reason behind Zhan's release was due to the deteriorating Sino-Japanese relations rather than any reason of legal basis.

For instance, there was not valid reason for the decision of Japanese authorities to extend Zhan's detention duration from 9 September to 24

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September 2010. It severely depicted another negative image on the historically already 'tainted wall' of Japan to the Chinese public. Compared to the similar incident in 2008, the captain's arrest then was allowed to return in the space of 3 days while Zhan suffered for at least two weeks.

Despite official denials, it seems likely that Japan wanted to use Zhan's detention to make a point on Japan's claims of sovereignty on the Diaoyu islands. However, how exactly then Japanese prime minister Naoto Kan and his government wanted to use the Zhan situation is not conclusive.

Yet what would then cause Japan to make such a decision? This arouses the second catalysts of this dispute – the concept of Japanese insecurity.

According to Deng Xiaoping, 'to be rich is glorious' and Japan is doing the opposite – gloriously plummeting. Fear is a prerequisite ingredient of building towards an irrational action and this detention decision may have been those of a declining power. For the past decades, there has been a clear transition of China's economic and political position in the world stage. In contrast with Japan's stagnant economy and weakening influence, it has imbedded a sense of insecurity among the Japanese, who have traditionally considered themselves the leading power in Asia.

In addition, more personally for Prime Minister Kan, a stronger nationalistic line against the Chinese might have helped Kan's flailing figures in the opinion polls. This was in various parts considered as naivety from Prime Minister Kan's government but essentially reflect the inexperience ruling Democratic People of Japan's in dealing with foreign affairs

In defence of Japan, this could have been a precautionary measure. One possible explanation behind Zhan's extended detention was the suspicion that Zhan Qixiong and his ships were actually Chinese military personnel undercover. The Chinese navy has been known to disguise their activities by using fish boats and his prolonged detention may have been an indirect attempt to reveal the credibility of this theory.

However Japan's fortitude is has no landing. Since the Japanese government did not release any information regarding Zhan's possible duplicity, it seems unlikely that Zhan had anything to do with the Chinese navy.

Regardless of the decision behind the extended the decision, the release of Zhan was criticized by Japan's media and opposition parties. This clearly did not contribute any fruits for Prime Minister Kan's government opinion polls in fact it actually harmed the international relations with China.

However is this dispute limited to the present Japan then? The third catalyst argues that this matter is more complicated because there has always existed historical tensions between both nations. Prime Minister Kan and his government grossly aggravated China but the detention did not involve any major casualties. The issue became an alarming matter because of the accumulation of events that has evolved over the years sparking a reaction.

China has always felt that previous Japanese efforts to apologize over the atrocities made by the Japanese military during its invasion of China in the 1930s and 1940s have been insincere. For instance the visit of former Prime Minister Koizumi to the Yasukuni Shrine which honours Japan's war dead

(including the war criminals), triggered or at least indirectly acted as a catalyst for the rise of nationalism in Japan.

Additionally in 2005, major demonstration took place across China over the printing of a Japanese school textbook that whitewashed Japan's atrocities over China in the Second World War. Likewise another intriguing aspect is that the demonstrations on China over Zhan's detention in 2010 actually took place on the anniversary of the Mukden incident which was regarded as the start of the Japanese invasion of China.

With respect to Japan, this is not to say that Japan and history are the culprits and China is the victim. In fact, overriding these factors, the fourth pillar is the revival of nationalism in China. One of the recent phenomena within China has been the growing nationalism among its people. China's growing affluence and confidence over the past 20 years have led to increasing calls by the Chinese public to redress its "century of shame" and regain the territories it lost to foreign occupation during the 19th century and early 20th century. This includes Taiwan, the South China Sea - Spratly Island dispute and the Senkaku islands claimed by Japan.

In this case, when Zhan returned back to China, he was received by the Assistant Foreign Minister Hu Zhengyue and Fujian vice Governor Hong Jiexu, both with respectably prominent political positions. It represented a mark from the Chinese leaders of how much they 'cared' for their people especially from foreign hands.

The Chinese government has often been accused of utilizing this latent nationalism to create national pride and unity but also as a method to deflect

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China's own internal problems. The emergence of the Chinese 'netizens' has been central to this new nationalism with many government ministries and agencies monitoring the internet to gain a sense of public opinion on how they view the sovereignty rights over the Senkaku Islands.

This illustrates a notion that though the association of China and democracy would be a contradiction, China does take account of the majority public's perspectives. Outburst from the people, be it criticisms or sensitive comments become an incentive for the government to have a firmer nationalist figure in the fear of losing political stability. It is this fear of criticism by Chinese 'netizens' that could be behind China's decision to take such a stubborn stance on not just the Senkaku islands but all of its territories.

Yet public opinion is the people's freedom of expression and even they have mixed views on this matter. Thus the media is not the guilty party.

Ultimately, it lays down to the Chinese leader who use the media as a device to launch their nationalist view and that constructs the fifth cornerstone of this study.

Although the Chinese media is beyond transparent, the state-controlled media no longer monopolizes information going into and coming out of China. This fracturing of channels of communication into and out of the country has allowed average Chinese citizens to formulate their own opinions on the subject of the dispute. The ability to sidestep the Chinese Communist Party control of expression increasingly influences Chinese foreign policy.

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Of course it has had to struggle of reaching the delicate balance of allowing disgruntled citizens room to express their displeasure and prevent it from becoming combustible as well as possibly turning against the Party. Yet even with this fear in mind China's Communist Party has selectively 'allowed' some public outcries against foreign entities while always trying to contain them so that they don't get out of hand. For instance the government media took advantage of the accidents and staged media coverage of 1999 anti-US protests following the Belgrade embassy bombing and the 2005 anti-Japanese riots. Hence the territorial dispute is no exception.

These tactics are often dismissed as diversionary tactics by the Party to deflect negative sentiments from domestic problems onto international adversaries. As this study goes, the exposure of the media may allow certain 'western values' creep in and the possibly insecure Chinese Communist Party is worried about its image, so occasionally it foments anti-foreign sentiment to replace the discredited ideologies of Mao as well as enhance its image as the guardian of Chinese national pride.

Despite all of this, does this conclude then that Chinese leaders are the spark for the territorially nationalistic response? This is not necessarily true. Sun Tzu stated in the Art of War: do not start a war unless you can be sure you can win it. Chinese leaders may have their ambitions but what is uplifting these visions further is simply due to the optimism from the positive escalating events China within the last decade which completes the final pillar. As China becomes more confident, so does the demands for their territorial ownership.



How does China enrich itself with such confidence? The combination of economic prosperity, fastest rate of urbanization in the world and military prowess has given the Chinese people a sense of confidence.

Deng Xiaoping once mentioned that 'China is not a superpower nor will she ever seek to be one' and 'never claim leadership' yet with the resources at their disposal, China is doing just that. Apart from overtaking Japan as the second largest economy in the world, China's military expenditure is more than twice the size of Japan.

This military differentiation is important because during World War II which ended in 1945, Japan's military power clearly overwhelmed Chinese forces. Six decades forward to the present, not only can China match up but it is far more superior to Japan. Zhan's detention was a major complication because China could have easily violently retaliated back through warfare means because it knows it can defeat Japan.

On the other hand, referring to the timescale of when this issue will resolve any time soon - there is no reliable indicator of this. Essentially it is not a matter of when but what China's international actions at present and future followed by Japan's reactions that will determine the possible outcome.

Take account of how much does China really value the Senkaku islands compared to Taiwan and the Spratlys, surely it falls below both territories. Whether China achieves sovereignty of the Diaoyu islands or not, increase land ownership is not the main objective. The fundamental message China portrays here is that it is establishing and challenging the Asian status quo. In other words China is reclaiming its throne as the regional hegemon. If  
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China is to fulfil its 'prophecy' of becoming the next global powerhouse such as the United States, historically a country cannot become a hegemon without first becoming a regional leader itself. How does China's assertion exacerbate the dispute then?

Alternatively potential unrest on the Senkaku islands depends on the rate of how China's assertion is affecting its other territorial claims. Besides the Senkaku islands there looms: Tibet, Taiwan, East Turkestan and the Spratly islands. Tibet and East Turkestan has very limited political mobility. Taiwan is uncertain. Thus this leaves exposed the Spratly islands in the South China Sea.

Against the United Nations Law of the Convention of the Sea, China argues its territorial rights on an area of the South China Sea known as the Spratly islands by historical documents dating back since the Min dynasty. The primary claimant against China includes Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam. With respect to these four claimants, even if they combined forces and resources it would not level with China nor can they even expect to match up bilaterally.

However, the claimants could then call for assistance from an international organization and transcend their voice multilaterally through the Association of South East Asian Nations. Despite this, even ASEAN alone cannot control a soaring phoenix for long. Made up of eleven nations most of these countries are economically dependent on the Chinese market and arguably none of them would unwisely disrupt this relationship.

As a consequence, China may then cast its eyes on the Senkaku islands and this time with a more demanding approach. China can then build on its naval warfare and presence in the South China Sea and in the long run this sphere of influence may reach the coast of the Senkaku islands. When this occur the territorial tension, it may spell serious ramifications towards the East Asian front. Therefore territorial dispute beyond Senkaku also plays a significant role in affecting the dispute with Japan.

To resolve this dispute then, Japan requires the presence of the United States. It needs to ensure the United States alliance does not aggravate China and some in the South China Sea as well to support ASEAN. However this will undermine its political credibility further. Struck with domestic economic and political difficulties, Japan's ruling party pledged to make Japan less American centric yet we can already see a shift back to the Eagle. For instance Japanese Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara's visit to the United States in September 2011 about " security issues" meant to deter China's assertiveness.

Domestically for Japan, this may hurt the ruling party's popularity as some Japanese supporters see it as backtracking on its promises. Yet the extent of China's emergence has meant that Prime Minister Kan's government might have no choice but to seek rapprochement with the United States.

On another perspective, this can be criticised as a bias to the realist point of view. Despite the negatives tones emerging out from China, it has been a positive force in the region. China's economic growth in the past 20 years has helped bear fruits in the region and even shielded the region from the

full effects of the 2008-2009 global recessions. It has also played a key part in promoting greater regionalism through its support of the ASEAN plus Three Framework and the East Asia Summit.

Despite the political wrangling, cooperation between the two sides continues to flourish. China has just become Japan's biggest trading partner while Japan is China's second biggest trading partner with total trade of nearly US\$ 230 billion in 2009. Japan has the second biggest contingent of foreign students in China (over 13, 000 in 2008) and the recent cancellation of an exchange tour for Japanese youths to the World Expo in Shanghai as a result of Zhan's detention is unlikely to hinder this development.

Unfortunately there does not seem to be elements within the Chinese government that is keen to prolong this row. Not long after Zhan's arrest, four Japanese civilians were subsequently detained in China on charges of spying and Beijing apparently ordered a temporary halt of exports of rare earths to Japan that are essential to Japanese automakers' operations. Many foresaw this as "tit for tat" retaliation on Zhan's detention. According to reports, attempts by the Japanese ambassador to China to discuss the detention of these nationals with the Chinese Foreign Ministry have so far been rebuffed.

Consequently, with the unresolved history between China and Japan coupled with Japan's uncertainty on how to deal with an increasingly affluent, assertive and dominant China, we can expect Sino-Japanese relations to continue to ebb and flow. Essentially the territorial dispute over the Diaoyu or Senkaku islands is unlikely to resolve anytime soon nor in the next few

decades. China and Japan both realise that conflict could economically cost them and both countries are still deeply submerged in their own domestic dilemmas. However if China's military prowess continues its advancement, so will China's political demands. As Mao Zedong once said, "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun" - China's rising military force may prove to be the catalyst towards a catastrophic territorial conflict which will have direct and indirect implications to the whole region creating concerns over a future dominated by China - again.