



**POPULAR NATIONALISM IN  
CHINA AND THE SINO-JAPANESE  
RELATIONSHIP**

THE CONFLICT IN THE EAST CHINA SEA  
AN INTRODUCTORY STUDY

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	4
1. Introduction	5
2. The East China Sea: competing claims	7
3. The rise of anti-Japanese nationalism	10
4. Four dispute crises	12
The 1990 crisis	12
The 1996 crisis	12
The 2004–5 crisis	14
The 2010 crisis	16
5. New initiatives in the ‘00s	18
‘New thinking’ and a rare public debate	18
Ups and downs of new agreements	19
6. Conclusions: the tensions of adopting Janus-like positions	22
Bibliography	25

## **Abstract**

The Sino-Japanese relationship is a highly complex one, marked both by Japan's aggressive wars from the 1930s on and the present economic interdependence between the two countries. Focusing on the role of the territorial conflict in the East China Sea, this DIIS Report considers how China's leaders handle anti-Japanese nationalism by adopting a Janusian stance and pursuing both China's basic interest in close economic relations with Japan and also domestic stability. After a review of Chinese and Japanese sovereignty claims in the area and of the rise of nationalism since the early 1980s, four crises over the East China Sea are examined to identify the character of and changes in China's policy. For the last ten years China's leaders have attempted to conduct a more pragmatic policy towards Japan and evade the pernicious shadow of history. But this policy faces critical problems both in a growing popular nationalism in China and in the Japanese government's lack of willingness to restrain their own nationalists and the absence of legal possibilities for them to do so.

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## I. Introduction

The Sino-Japanese relationship is very complex, fraught, and weighed down by the heavy historical baggage of, in particular, Japan's atrocities in China from the 1930s up until the end of World War II (Manicom and O'Neil, 2009). China's approach to a partnership with Japan for developing a peaceful and prosperous East Asia is ambivalent, swinging between the poles of historical legacy and present economic ties (Goldstein, 2005: 163–8). On the one hand China's long-standing conviction, expressed in popular anti-Japanese nationalism, that Japan's aggressive behaviour in the past is a reliable guide to its future inclinations means that historical memory and the politics of history create tensions between the two countries that could trigger the use of military force with serious consequences for the future of the Asia–Pacific region (Jin, 2006). On the other hand, pragmatic Chinese leaders realise that China's economic development is dependent upon a continued close economic partnership with Japan. According to interdependence theories, economic interdependence and other transnational relations between countries lead to shared interests that will prevent military conflicts between two states (Keohane and Nye, 2001). However, extensive economic ties and evident economic interdependence between China and Japan in the post-Cold War period haven't created new attitudes to each other and have failed to prevent a marked deterioration of relations between East Asia's two economic giants (Yahuda, 2006).

For China's leaders the domestic context of nationalism, which manifests as popular indignation against Japan, and the pursuance of a pragmatic Japan policy is a highly difficult, sensitive, and dangerous cocktail. The territorial dispute over the East China Sea is the most immediate flashpoint and, together with other Japan-related issues, may prompt Chinese leaders to fan the fires of anti-Japanese nationalism as a move to back up the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The large-scale protests against Japan in China's cities may also reach a point where they threaten to spin out of control (Gries, 2005a; Shirk, 2007: 140f.). The attempt to combine nationalism with a pragmatic foreign policy in order to promote China's modernisation conflicts with a deep-seated and strident popular nationalism that eventually may become a threat to domestic stability and have disturbing consequences for China's international reputation. So, nationalism provides China's leaders with a collection of highly risky "hot-button issues" (Goldstein, 2005: 95). For the leadership it is crucial to prevent nationalism turning from a tool into a threat and becoming a double-edged sword. One way to handle the dilemma has been to adopt 'Janus-like'

positions, i.e. a dual policy, in territorial conflicts towards neighbouring countries in China's adjacent waters (Chien-peng, 1998: 137; Collins, 2002: 312). The basic line in that policy is to stake the fundamental and non-negotiable sovereignty claim, but at the same time to seek out negotiation and cooperation on non-sovereignty issues. In Sino-Japanese relations another dilemma-reducing measure has been to seek to control historical memory and the politics of history, for instance by prompting a challenge to the relevance of history in actual foreign policy making. Both procedures carry risks.

As part of a broader study project, *Nationalism and Foreign Policy in the Rising China: the role of irredentist claims*, this DIIS Report presents an introductory study of the role of popular nationalism in China's Japan policy. It focuses on the character and changes in the Janusian positions adopted by China's leaders during four crises which originated in the simmering territorial conflict with Japan over the East China Sea. In order to further elaborate on China's composite Japan policy, new Chinese initiatives in the first decade of this century to improve relations between the two countries are considered: how was the reaction in China to these initiatives and what characterised the initiatives in relation to the future of Sino-Japanese relations and the role of popular nationalism?

In section 2 the geographical, economic and historical characteristics of Chinese and Japanese claims in the East China Sea are reviewed. In section 3 the rise of anti-Japanese nationalism in the People's Republic of China (PRC) is briefly considered: how did the history of Japan's aggressive wars become a predominant issue, after having been downplayed for years in China? Section 4 focuses on four crises in the period after the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989 which took place in 1990, 1996, 2004/5 and 2010. Section 5 reviews two sets of initiatives in the last ten years: first, a spectacular attempt to tackle the Japan issue by suggesting a 'new thinking' in China's approach that was followed by an unprecedented exchange of views in open debate in 2003/4 and second, new agreements between China and Japan over the East China Sea. Finally, in section 6, I present conclusions on the challenges to the Chinese leadership's Janus-like position.

## 2. The East China Sea: competing claims

The East China Sea is a semi-enclosed sea of about 1,250,000 km<sup>2</sup> lying between the eastern coast of China and the Pacific Ocean, bounded on the west by mainland China, on the east by the Japanese Ryukyu islands, and on the south by Taiwan (cf. map 1). It is connected with the South China Sea by the Taiwan Strait and with the Sea of Japan by the Korea Strait between Japan and South Korea. The northern part of the East China Sea is the Yellow Sea between China, North Korea and South Korea. The area disputed between China and Japan aggregates about 210,000 km<sup>2</sup> (double the size of Iceland) which represents the overlap between the two countries' claims of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). Japan claims a division on the median line between the two countries' coastlines, while China claims its EEZ extends to the eastern end of the Chinese continental shelf, which goes deep into Japan's EEZ (Drifte, 2008a and b).

An important part of the dispute concerns the Diaoyu (in Japanese: Senkaku) islands, which comprise five uninhabited islands and three rocks, aggregating roughly 7 km<sup>2</sup>. All are of little intrinsic value; the largest is about 3 km in length and less than 2 km in width. Geologically, the islands are on the Asian continental shelf, which is separated by the 2,270m deep underwater trench, the Okinawa Trough, from the Japanese Ryukyu islands. The Diaoyu/Senkaku islands and rocks are situated approximately halfway, i.e. about 400 km, between the Chinese mainland and the Japanese island of Okinawa, and about 170 km northeast of Taiwan (Dzurek, 1996). They are currently held by Japan but claimed by China (as well as Taiwan), a claim that rests partly on historical records dating back to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and that is reiterated in later documentation about Chinese fishermen's operations and journeys by Chinese envoys (Blanchard, 2006: 212–13; Downs and Saunders, 1998/99: 125; Pan, 2007: 77; Tan, 2006). However, in these earlier periods China never established a permanent settlement of civilians nor of military personnel on the islands, and apparently did not maintain permanent naval forces in the adjacent waters (Niksich, 1996). Together with Taiwan, the islets were given to Japan in the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895 after the first Sino-Japanese war when China's defeat was a painful humiliation. From the end of World War II until 1972 the United States administered the islands as part of their occupation of Okinawa and in that year they were returned to Japan along with Okinawa. Both China and Taiwan protested and claimed sovereignty over the islands. Desiring to avoid offending either China or Japan, the United States refused to take a position on the sovereignty dispute, arguing that conflicting claims





were a matter for resolution by the parties concerned. The American non-position has been reaffirmed on later occasions by the American government. However, since the administration of the islands was transferred to Japan both Japan and the United States have maintained that the disputed islands fall within the scope of their 1960 Mutual Security Treaty – although the United States has long preferred not to stress this commitment in public (Fravel, 2010: 148).

Economic interests form part of the background for the conflicting jurisdictional claims. The disputed area is thought to hold substantial oil and gas reserves and, since it is relatively shallow, it is conducive to resource exploitation. After the first reports on the potential existence of rich petroleum deposits under the East China Sea in the late 1960s, China began to officially state its claim that the islands were Chinese territory, but the claim didn't play a prominent role until later (see below). Since the mid-1990s China has been test drilling for oil and gas beyond as well as within the median line claimed by Japan. China has strongly upgraded its ability to exploit resources and has become markedly more active in its resource exploitation in the East China Sea (Blanchard, 2006: 225–31; Donaldson and Williams, 2005). Also, the East China Sea offers rich fishing grounds that are used by Chinese fishermen. However, the disputing parties' need for resources, especially China's strongly increasing need for energy coupled with the two countries' dependence on foreign oil, does not mean to say that the dispute can be reduced to simply an 'oil and gas' conflict. In any case, different motives are closely interwoven. Any settlement will be also be related to China's deep historical resentment of Japan and the fact that opposition to Japan is an important part of the Chinese national identity. Claimed by the PRC, Japan, and Taiwan, the islands have a symbolic significance. Any attempt to solve the dispute could set a precedent for the resolution of other sovereignty claims in adjacent waters. Most important is the linkage to the reunification of Taiwan as China sees the Diaoyu islands as a part of Taiwan and validates its claims to the tiny islands through its claims to Taiwan; in fact Article 2 of the 1992 Law on 'Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone' states that the islands appertain to Taiwan, see the next section.

### 3. The rise of anti-Japanese nationalism

Anti-Japanese nationalism is a relatively new phenomenon in the PRC. It grew up in the first half of the 1980s, but after the early 1990s it was boosted as a prominent aspect of the new Chinese nationalism. During the Mao era and the Cold War, both before and after China and Japan normalised their diplomatic relations in 1972, class struggle and confrontation between the CCP and the Kuomintang and the communist victory in the Chinese civil war were emphasised in Maoist and ideological terms. China's leaders had little need to mobilise nationalist sentiments against Japan, and if Mao wanted to mobilise the public with an international threat, he used the United States and later the Soviet Union (Shirk, 2007: 158). China and Japan avoided disputes over historical memory, and the government in Beijing suppressed historical investigation of Japanese war crimes and blocked information on Japanese textbook distortion of Japan's crimes (He, 2007b: 46–50). After the clashes between China and the Soviet Union in 1969, China and Japan formed a loose strategic alignment against the Soviet Union and, in 1972, at the preparatory meetings for the normalisation of diplomatic relations between the two countries, Premier Zhou Enlai told Japanese delegates that there was no need to mention the Diaoyu Islands which did not count as a problem of any sort compared to recovering normal diplomatic relations. Zhou also told the Japanese Prime Minister that the few militarists must be strictly separated from the vast majority of Japanese people, thereby endorsing the Japanese myth of distinguishing between the many good Japanese and the few bad in a military clique (He, 2007a). Six years later, in 1978, Deng Xiaoping visited Japan in the first ever visit by a PRC leader and proposed that China and Japan should shelve the territorial dispute in order to improve their bilateral relationship. In 1984 Deng reiterated that China's domestic development couldn't be interrupted by territorial disputes, which should be shelved and replaced by developing 'joint exploitation' (Zheng, 1999: 132).

However, by then the first beginnings of public anti-Japanese nationalism had appeared with the first Sino-Japanese textbook controversy of 1982 (He, 2007b: 51–6). It was the first time since the war that China had taken issue with Japan's historical views and to appease the conservative faction's critique of his shift from class struggle to economic modernisation and to dampen the growing social instability and the declining public faith in the CCP, Deng seized the opportunity to boost Chinese patriotism. From 1985 a campaign by the Ministry of Education emphasised the teaching of China's history of resisting foreign aggression and after the Tiananmen debacle in 1989 Japan

was targeted as the national enemy (He, 2007a: 6–7, and 2007b: 51–6). Nationalism or, in official Chinese parlance: patriotism (*aiguo zghuyi*) replaced Maoism–Marxism–Leninism as the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party’s legitimacy to enhance internal cohesion. In 1992 the National People’s Congress promulgated a law on ‘Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone’. In that law the geographic scope of China’s sovereignty claim included, among others, the Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea.<sup>1</sup> The 1992 law sparked protests from Japan, which as already mentioned currently holds the Diaoyu/ Senkaku) islands.

Thus, the rise of anti-Japanese nationalism since the early-to-mid 1980s was a part of the Deng leadership’s efforts to dampen the opposition to the shift from class struggle to economic modernisation. In the same way, China’s post-Deng leaders have often used anti-Japanese nationalism to shore up the CCP’s legitimacy. However, this doesn’t mean that the Chinese people’s anti-Japanese feelings and the importance of the historical legacy are simply manipulated by the government (Jian, 2001: 2–3). To say so would be not only to underestimate the genuine concern about Japan, but also to misjudge the complex character of the relationship between historical legacy and its relevance for present policy-making.

<sup>1</sup> Article 2 states: “The territorial sea of the People’s Republic of China is the sea belt adjacent to the land territory and the internal waters of the People’s Republic of China. The land territory of the People’s Republic of China includes the mainland of the People’s Republic of China and its coastal islands; Taiwan and all islands appertaining thereto including the Diaoyu Islands; the Penghu Islands; the Dongsha Islands; the Xisha Islands; the Zhongsha Islands and the Nansha Islands; as well as all the other islands belonging to the People’s Republic of China.” See: <http://www.asianlii.org/cn/legis/cen/laws/lotprococottsatz739/>

## **4. Four dispute crises**

How did China's leaders handle the conflict between popular nationalism and the interest in fruitful economic relations with Japan in the four dispute crises of 1990, 1996, 2004–5, and 2010? The second and third of the four crises were major and stretched over longer periods.

### **The 1990 crisis**

The first crisis occurred when the Chinese leadership was under extreme pressure after the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown of a year before. The actual crisis began in late September when the Japanese press reported that Japan was preparing to recognise the lighthouse, built in 1978 by the Japanese ultra-nationalist Youth Federation on the largest of the Senkaku rocks, as an 'official navigation mark' (Downs and Saunders, 1998/99: 127–31). In mid-October, a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson responded to a press conference question by condemning the lighthouse as a violation of China's sovereignty. Still, the government was clearly restrained in its protests and imposed a media blackout on the public protests in Taiwan and banned similar protests inside China. However, students in Beijing learned about them through the BBC and Voice of America. The outcome was that by banning anti-Japanese demonstrations China's leaders and the CCP became the target of public complaints as they attempted to meet conflicting demands. Thus, at one point, Taiwan seemed more willing to defend China's sovereignty than China itself, when it was the first to protest to Japan and when Taiwanese activists attempted a landing on the islands but were repelled by Japan. However, Taiwan's government also took steps to stop the activists (Downs and Saunders, 1998/99: 130–31).

### **The 1996 crisis**

The 1996 crisis took place just as Chinese sensitivities had been heightened by the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995–6. The actual crisis began in mid-July when the Japanese Youth Federation who had built the lighthouse mentioned above 18 years earlier, erected a second makeshift lighthouse on the islands, a 5 m high, solar-powered, aluminium lighthouse (Dzurek, 1996). When a few days later Japan ratified the Convention of the Law of the Sea and declared an exclusive economic zone that included the islets, then Japanese ultra-nationalist groups demanded that their government should claim the lighthouse as an official Japanese landmark. China

had ratified the Convention earlier in the summer, also reaffirming its sovereignty over the islands, and so the two countries' ratification of an attempt at international rule making prompted an occasion for unilateralism (Blanchard, 2006: 217–8; Downs and Saunders, 1998/99: 131–8). When the Japanese foreign minister, in discussions with Hong Kong officials in late August, reaffirmed Japan's claim to the islands, it prompted stern warnings from a spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, stating that as far as the sovereignty was concerned, China could not make any compromise. The Japanese government was accused of connivance with ultra-nationalists, but at the same time a Chinese offer to shelve the sovereignty dispute in favour of joint development was repeated (Gries, 2004: 122). A more strident tone appeared in a front-page editorial in the *People's Daily*, which declared, "whoever expects the 1.2 billion Chinese people to give up even an inch of their territory is only daydreaming" (Downs and Saunders, 1998/99: 133). In the same way, key military periodicals carried a series of articles attacking the 'revival of Japanese militarism' and claimed that Japanese actions were part of a larger conspiracy.

In mid-September the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman lodged a new, strong protest after the Japanese youth groups had returned to repair the new lighthouse, which had been damaged by a typhoon. A few days later the PLA practiced blockades and landings on islands of Liaoning Province on China's east coast as a warning to Japan against further incursions on the Diaoyu Islands. As these days were also around the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Japan's invasion of Manchuria, anti-Japanese feelings were heightened in East Asia, and anti-Japanese demonstrations were arranged by Chinese activists in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, as well as by the overseas Chinese community in the United States and Canada. In late September one Hong Kong activist died near the islands and in early October protesters landed on the islands and raised the PRC and Taiwan flags, which were later removed by the Japanese (Dzurek, 1996). In Taiwan some senior officials even called for a collective action of 'defending the sovereignty' by the mainland and Taiwan. Also, Chinese dissidents sent an open letter to the governments in Beijing and Taipei urging the use of military force to reclaim the islands (Chang, 1998: 90–1; Zheng, 1999: 131f.). Moreover, a Chinese dissident magazine published in New York, *China Spring*, obtained and published a CCP Central Propaganda Department document that revealed the calculations of China's leaders when they prohibited demonstrations and restrained and steered reports and commentaries appearing in the Chinese media. These disclosures were extra fuel to the large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations staged by ethnic Chinese outside China (Zhao, 2004b: 274–5).

In the PRC there was minimal media coverage of the dispute and student demonstrations were particularly suppressed. Thus the Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs went to Beijing University personally to ensure that students remained calm, and the authorities denied students web access for ten days. Obviously China's leaders were determined to keep ordinary Chinese from making protests and exacerbating the dispute further. However, protests were still expressed in cyberspace, which became a major arena for popular Diaoyu activism. It is also worth noting that several mainland books and articles, published in the summer and fall of 1996, discussed the controversy with Japan. Suppression of protests, if feasible, was coupled with attempts to co-opt nationalist demands (Gries, 2004: 122–5). When the foreign ministers from China and Japan met later in September at the United Nations General Assembly in New York, both reaffirmed their claim to the islands, but they were clearly determined to prevent nationalist groups from escalating the dispute and agreed that it should not overshadow good bilateral relations. The Chinese Foreign Minister urged Japan to remove the lighthouse, but he made no threats. The Japanese Foreign Minister stated that his government had no plans to officially recognise the lighthouse, but he made no commitment to remove it. After new surges of the dispute, including more anti-Japanese demonstrations and contacts between the two governments, the issue was brought to a close in October (Chien-peng, 1998: 142–4 and 148–53; Deans, 2000: 122–4).

### **The 2004–5 crisis**

This crisis was triggered off by different events in early 2004. In January two Chinese fishing vessels in waters near the disputed islands were attacked by Japanese patrol boats. Two months later, a group of activists from China landed on the islands, but were immediately taken away and detained by the Japanese Coast Guard before being deported to China two days later (Blanchard, 2006: 220–4; Fravel, 2010: 153; Reilly, 2008: 202–6). It was the first time activists from China had been tolerated by the Chinese authorities and seven of them succeeded in landing on the islands. China reacted strongly against Japan's prevention of Chinese citizens from landing on islands that "have been Chinese territory from ancient times, over which China has indisputable sovereignty", and demanded the immediate and unconditional release of the arrested. This demand was supported by a group of anti-Japanese activists outside Japan's embassy in Beijing who were closely monitored by Chinese police. At about the same time, exercises in the East China Sea had been scheduled and, together with the arrest of the Chinese activists, they were used to put pressure on Japan when Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao had talks with

Japan's Foreign Minister in Beijing in early April. China's claims in the territorial dispute were reiterated and Wen urged members of Japan's government to halt visits to the Yasukuni shrine, arguing that continued visits hurt the feelings of the Chinese people and could damage future bilateral relations. After the summer of 2004, the competition between the countries' explorations for natural gas in the disputed area escalated, with repeated claims, actions and counteractions. Just before scheduled talks in Beijing between the two countries on gas exploration in the East China Sea, China signalled its resolve by deploying four armed navy ships near the disputed islands, among other reasons to warn Japan to be cautious in ongoing talks with the United States about the role of the American military in the region. Other Chinese military deployments also demonstrated China's growing ability and willingness to project its naval power in adjacent waters (Wiegand, 2009: 185–7; Zhongqi, 2007: 76–7).

In February 2005 Japan announced that the lighthouse erected by Japanese activists had been placed under state control and protection. This was unexpected, and the Chinese Foreign Ministry called it “a serious provocation and violation of Chinese territorial sovereignty” (Zhongqi, 2007: 76). Moreover, at about this time Japan and the United States issued a joint declaration on security in the Far East in which it was stated that the peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question was a shared strategic objective. By itself, the declaration added hardly anything new, but together with other international irritants it clearly heightened the sensitivity of Beijing towards the military rivalry with Japan (Cabestan, 2005: 158). Early in April Japan began to allocate rights for gas exploration in Chinese-claimed areas, a move that was repeated in the summer (Blanchard, 2006: 221f.).

At around the same time an unprecedented wave of anti-Japanese protests occurred all across China, organised by, among others, the ‘China Federation to Protect the Diaoyu Islands’ and coordinated over the Internet and with the use of personal mobile phones as a decentralised, bottom-up mobilisation with no visible leadership, and so very difficult for the authorities to stop despite official restrictions and prohibitions (Liu, 2006: 144; Shirk, 2007: 140–4). Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in more than 40 cities (Liu, 2006). The protests lasted for several weeks and led to violent attacks on Japan's embassy in Beijing and Japanese-owned businesses. But the dispute and the protests featured very little in the media – a clear sign that the authorities realised that the demonstrations could become a double-edged sword. Later, in summer 2005, the authorities raided the Federation's office in Beijing (Fravel, 2010: 153–5).

Various issues were linked together by the demonstrators. In addition to the territorial dispute in the East China Sea, there were Japan's bid for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council and new history textbooks by Japan's Ministry of Education that glossed over Japan's wartime atrocities in China (Wiegand, 2009: 187–9). The Chinese government may not have directly initiated the demonstrations, but it was only too happy to take advantage of the protests to further its objectives in the dispute with Japan. However, as on earlier occasions, the government in Beijing was careful to avoid escalating anti-Japanese demonstrations that would damage the image of China as a peacefully rising power. But it is evident that the force and scope of the public protests were unexpected by China's leaders. Thus the course of the crisis in 2004–5 showed that the party-state's adaptive capabilities should not be underestimated in an authoritarian one-party system like China; it didn't so much control public opinion as harness and channel it, in line with its political priorities (McGregor, 2010: 270–1). Focusing on China's approach to international power factors it has to be noted that, in the autumn of 2004, China had announced the establishment of a naval reserve fleet specifically for use in the East China Sea and the deployment of naval ships in the area to protect its territorial sovereignty (Valencia, 2007: 131f.). Thus, when these other Chinese naval deployments are considered, it was obvious that China was signalling its resolve and increased military capabilities not only to Japan, but also to the US.

In early March 2005 the Chinese leadership took the first steps aimed at improving relations with Japan and new diplomatic efforts were initiated to deal with the dispute. While public protests were restrained by the government, other shifts in China's policy toward Japan reflected protesters' demands (Reilly, 2008: 206–12).

### **The 2010 crisis**

The occasion for the 2010 crisis was the collision between a Chinese trawler and two Japanese Coast Guard ships on September 7, north of one of the disputed islands. After the Chinese fishing boat attempted to flee, Japanese Coast Guard personnel boarded the Chinese vessel and arrested the crew. China reacted with a series of diplomatic measures aiming at upholding China's sovereignty in the disputed area. In Beijing, a spokesperson for the Foreign Ministry told the media that China was "seriously concerned over the Japanese action" and had "made solemn representations with Japan" (Przystup, 2010: 5). China's historical claim to sovereignty over the area was reiterated and it demanded that Japan's Coast Guard refrain from engaging in illegal law enforcement activities in Chinese waters. China dispatched a fishery law-



enforcement team to the area to safeguard fishery production and the safety of Chinese fishermen's lives and property in accordance with Chinese law. In the Chinese media the incident was headlined, and 30–40 protesters appeared in front of the Japanese embassy and demanded an apology. Demonstrations also took place outside Japanese consulates in other Chinese cities but all were under police control. On September 11 China's Foreign Ministry announced postponement of the scheduled mid-September round of negotiations on the East China Sea. Also, there were calls for containing Japan by using trade as leverage as well as cancellations of tourist trips to Japan and other cultural exchange arrangements by the two countries (Przystup, 2010). Later, in a speech in New York on September 22 to a gathering of Chinese nationals and Chinese-Americans, Premier Wen Jiabao urged Japan to release the detained captain immediately and unconditionally; otherwise, China would take further actions and Japan would have to take all the responsibility for the serious consequences. As for the crew, they had been released after six days whereas the captain was detained for further investigations until September 24. When members of the crew arrived back in China their release was hailed by China's 'netizens' as a diplomatic victory (Przystup, 2010: 6–7). After that the crisis alleviated.

One reason for the reduced tensions were the brief high-level meetings held between leaders of the two countries in early October. The Chinese premier and his Japanese counterpart met and talked briefly when they 'ran into each other' on October 5 at the Asia–Europe meeting in Brussels; reportedly they had ignored each other earlier in the meeting. While they reiterated their claims to the disputed area in their talk, they also agreed to hold high-level bilateral talks on regular basis. Another was a meeting in Hanoi on October 11 between the Chinese and the Japanese defence ministers, when they attended the first meeting of ASEAN and its eight so-called dialogue partners (Beukel, 2008: 29; BBC News. Asia–Pacific, 5 October 2010). Altogether this crisis shows that China is still, as before, interested in cultivating a restrained high-level diplomacy with Japan on the East China Sea dispute, but that it is also, like Japan, displaying a tougher and more robust approach in pursuing its sovereignty claim.

## 5. New initiatives in the '00s

Relations with Japan reached a low point in the late 1990s, especially after a disastrous visit by the then party and state leader Jiang Zemin in 1998 during which he was very bitter and accusative. Jiang spent much of his time in Tokyo chastising the Japanese for being insufficiently repentant over their militarist past and demanded a written apology from the government for Japanese war crimes (Roy, 2005; 193). As China's new leader, Jiang lacked the self-confidence of Mao and Deng through his later years, and this strengthened an inclination to appeal to popular nationalism at home. Early in the new century, however, it seems that the Chinese leadership, already even before Jiang left his position, decided to try a new policy approach to Japan based on a pragmatic recognition of the importance of growing economic ties rather than a patriotic appeal to nationalistic feelings and Japan's atrocities in China two generations ago. One sign of this appeared in late 2002, just after a new leadership replacing Jiang had been elected at the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. However, the unwieldy character of the Japan issue soon became apparent in an unusual public debate. In the following, after a review of this episode, the ups and down of new agreements on the East China Sea are considered.

### 'New thinking' and a rare public debate

A provocative essay published in late 2002 suggested that it was time for 'new thinking' on China's relations with Japan.<sup>2</sup> Ma Licheng restated the need for a peaceful international environment to solve China's domestic problems which had been an important Chinese goal since the 'reform and opening' policy was initiated in the late 1970s and he cited a statement by the departing leader, Jiang Zemin, in February 2002 that emphasised the need for friendship between China and Japan. Focusing on the future Sino-Japanese relationship three scenarios were outlined: that 1) Japan deepens its alliance with the United States, to check and balance China; 2) China and Japan keep each other at arm's length, suspecting each other, sometimes stabbing each other in the back; 3) China and Japan cooperate in jointly promoting the prosperity of the two countries together with East Asia and Southeast Asia. For the author, the

<sup>2</sup> The author was Ma Licheng, a prominent journalist on the *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*), the Communist Party's paper. The article "New Thinking on relations with Japan" was published in the December 2002 issue of the influential periodical *Strategy and Management* (*Zhanlüe yu guanli*). The example of Ma's essay and the reactions to it are mainly based on four sources: Chen and Zang (2004), Gries (2005b), Hughes (2006), and Roy (2005). Ma had visited Japan in January 2002, and his essay also appeared in two leading Japanese monthly magazines: the March 2003 issue of *Bungei Shunju* and the March 2003 issue of *Chuo Koron*.

desirable choice was the last one. Ma criticised what he saw as an ultra-nationalist attitude of many Chinese towards Japan. He suggested that China should stop giving so much weight to 'historical issues' and drop its insistence that Japan come clean with an apology for its aggressive wars against China.

A multitude of reactions to the demand for 'new thinking' appeared in the Chinese media. On the Internet some condemned the author as a 'traitor' and for being soft on Japan and Ma received death threats. But other writers defended Ma's views while yet others advocated a combination of embracing and balancing Japan. Actually, for a limited period of time in 2003–4 academics, concerned citizens, journalists and policy-oriented researchers engaged in an unprecedented and lively debate on whether there should be a new direction in China's Japan policy. Usually such delicate foreign policy issues are discussed behind closed doors in top state and party institutions or at *Zhongnanhai*, the leadership compound in central Beijing. However, in this case the debate was also allowed to be taken up with a passion by a broader, if still small, group in the vast civil Chinese society. Given the author's affiliation with *People's Daily*, the paper of China's Communist Party, it is natural to view the essay as a sign that the new Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao leadership, elected at the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in November 2002 shortly before, wanted to improve relations with Japan and test the ground for new thinking in Chinese policy. In fact it was sensational that Ma Licheng managed to draw out his controversial recommendations for improving relations with Japan from the premises of what had been CCP orthodoxy on foreign policy for more than twenty years.

The suggestions for 'new thinking' provoked a strong nationalist backlash and it seems that the Japan bashers got the upper hand when it came to addressing the shadow of history over China's Japan policy and popular attitudes toward Japan. This outcome was due both to domestic scepticism and to the fact that Japan's foreign policy makers and elites didn't make use of the opportunity as they were either afraid of their own nationalists or shared their persuasions. Whatever the reason, already from the summer and autumn of 2003 it was evident that popular anti-Japanese nationalism, combined with Janus-like positions, would continue to shape China's Japan policy. And then, a year later, popular anti-Japanese nationalism reached a new zenith with the 2004 crisis presented above.

### **Ups and downs of new agreements**

Continuous incidents involving fishing boats or naval patrols from China, Japan or Taiwan in the disputed area are sources of new nationalistic outbreaks in China and

Japan. In early 2001, after six rounds of talks, the two countries entered a prior-notification agreement based on a so-called *verbal note* that has two different versions, one issued by the Chinese and one by the Japanese. There are several ambiguities. For example, the agreement applies to ships engaging in scientific research in waters close to the other country if it is within an area in which that country ‘takes interest’. But it isn’t clear whether ‘scientific research’ applies to natural resources research, and the delimitation of the relevant waters (in which a country can be said to ‘take interest’) is also highly ambiguous. Moreover, the implementation mechanism is weak, and so it is not surprising that the actual implementation of the prior-notification system has been restricted and inconsistent. Overall, the agreement carefully avoided the delicate issue of conflicting boundaries and sovereignty claims (Drifte, 2008a: 18–20; Valencia, 2007: 130). Thus, rather than limiting and regulating new incidents, the ambiguities of the prior-notification agreement may in fact have increased the possibility for new nationalist outbursts.

Through the following years, 2004, 2005 and 2006, there were several consultations between the two countries on East China Sea matters even though their relationship reached a new low point during the 2004–5 crisis described above (Drifte, 2008a: 25–32). After the arrival of a new Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, in Japan in the autumn of 2006 and an implicit agreement with the Chinese president during his visit to Beijing shortly afterwards that he wouldn’t visit the Yasukuni shrine, prospects for an agreement on joint development projects in the area seemed to become brighter. As a joint statement from the two leaders expressed it: in order to make the East China Sea a “Sea of Confrontation, Cooperation and Friendship”, they would accelerate the process of consultation and “adhere to the broad direction of joint development” (Drifte, 2008b: 40). In April 2007, during Prime Minister Wen Jiabao’s visit to Tokyo, the pragmatic Japan policy was re-emphasised by Wen in a rare address to Japan’s parliament. Wen reiterated Chou Enlai’s 1972 interpretation of Japan’s war in China as one for which ‘only a handful of militarists’ were responsible and he refrained from mentioning the Yasukuni Shrine. The Chinese Premier did refer to the history-related problems that are at the heart of the dispute between China and Japan, but avoided the finger pointing that had accompanied Jiang Zemin’s visit to Tokyo in 1998 (Onishi, 2007).

In June 2008 the two governments, after lengthy negotiations, reached a ‘Principled Consensus’ on joint development of natural resources in the East China Sea. The accord was a small but noteworthy development in a dispute that has been marked by long-running wars of words and unilateral steps on both sides. However, the agree-

ment is only an agreement on principles, as what it established was a framework for joint exploration and production activities by oil companies from each side. It doesn't amount to a substantive progress concerning the delimitation of the maritime border in the East China Sea and, by focusing on functional cooperation, it may have reduced the imperative for settling the question of sovereignty (Drifte, 2008b: 43–5; Fravel, 2010: 159–61; Peterson, 2009). Anyway, the implementation will be very difficult and depend on the general development in Chinese–Japanese relations and the vagaries of the two countries' domestic politics (Drifte, 2008a). In China, the agreement was sharply criticised by Internet users, and in Hong Kong the media criticised the authorities for betraying national interests, humiliating the nation and forfeiting its sovereignty. In a demonstration in front of the Japanese embassy in Beijing, about 20 members of the 'China Federation for Defending the Diaoyu Islands' protested against the agreement; more than 40 police watched the scene, but did not stop the demonstration. The day after, a Chinese vice foreign minister publicly defended the agreement, saying that the two sides had decided to shelve territorial issues to reach a joint development agreement but that China had not abandoned its claim of sovereignty (Zhou, 2008).

## **6. Conclusions: the tensions of adopting Janus-like positions**

Measured in terms of regime stability and avoidance of open conflict with Japan, the Chinese Janus-like positions in the four crises have been successful. Chinese leaders' ability to meet challenges with expedient 'two-heads-facing-opposite-directions' policies has been impressive, even if supported by good luck as the complicated nature of popular nationalism makes it difficult to predict the consequences (Zheng, 1999: 134). As concluded by Manicom and O'Neill (2009: 227), the Chinese leadership has shown considerable determination and dexterity in navigating away from potential confrontation with Japan. China's and Japan's deep economic interdependence means that both sides have compelling incentives to manage their relationship carefully; indeed, both countries have displayed a high degree of pragmatism in avoiding being influenced by their respective nationalistic constituencies in actual crises and, at the same time, averting any encroachment on their sovereignty claims. Yet, it has to be emphasised that Japanese governments have often been reluctant to curb nationalist groups' aggressive activities either because they seem to share nationalist persuasions or because they cannot take strong measures against nationalists without violating basic civil rights. Activists and nationalists are also citizens with civil rights and so Japan's government has a limited freedom of action. Here lies an obvious asymmetry between the two countries.

But for all the crisis management capability of Beijing and Tokyo, it has to be noted that a long-term solution to the conflict is difficult to envisage. Maybe the fragile attempts at functional cooperation in East China Sea matters hold a promise to a slow downgrading of sovereignty issues; that would be in accordance with functional integration theories that have been developed on the basis of European integration. The central problem is, of course, whether that theory is valid in Asia, or whether state-directed high politics is more important as hinted at in the last part of section 5.

Focusing on China's policy, three trends should be noted. First, China's increasing willingness and ability to deploy military forces in the East China Sea. Second, China's growing capacity to exploit the resources in or close to the disputed area. Third, the increasingly prominent role of anti-Japanese grassroots organisations, based on the use of the Internet and personal mobile phones. The last point is especially important because it means that popular nationalism cannot be understood within a 'state-over-

society' view of Chinese politics. The party-state is clearly losing its control over the innumerable cyber-nationalist manifestations – manifestations that often merge into criticism of the Chinese government for being soft on Japan. The authorities clearly intend to impose the government's will and policy on the netizens, but public opinion on the net cannot be effectively silenced despite the persistence of state censorship (Liu, 2006: 148–9).

While the temptation to beat the anti-Japanese nationalist drum has become harder to resist, it has also become more dangerous as the party-state may lose control when it feels that it has to respond to increasingly popular and strident anti-Japanese groups (Chien-peng, 1998: 159 and 2007: 62). The central point is that fundamental goals of China as a country of strongly growing prosperity and the 'reform and opening' project may be lost if the party-state cannot control nationalist demands for more unilateral actions. To avoid that situation Chinese leaders are willing to apply all kinds of methods in combination with Janus-like policies. Of course, they do not and cannot know for sure the most effective methods when challenges appear, but they are predisposed to apply repressive measures to forbid any independent movements and clamp down on them if they become too nationalistic and/or independent. Outbursts of anti-Japanese indignation in the media and especially on the Internet in new crisis situations have given groups actively involved in online communities a role as pressure groups with a potential impact on Chinese foreign policy. The central point is that, given the lack of democratic and parliamentary mechanisms for influencing the decision-makers, the Internet is a useful outlet for nationalist groups to let off steam, notwithstanding that the authorities are often successful in attempts to restrain their communications (Jakobson and Knox, 2010: 43–6). A specific feature of the domestic situation is that the PLA's preference for firmness and strong anti-Japanese attitudes could play together with popular nationalism, ending up with squeezing civilian leaders into a confrontation with Japan, even though the PLA's loyalty to the party-state is beyond doubt (Bush, 2010).

Considered overall, however, there seems to be no immediate reason why the authorities' performance in the earlier China–Japan crises couldn't be repeated, including the control of public protests and intellectuals, before any demand for extensive Chinese military action to counter the 'ugly' Japanese were to become too excessive. In such a situation both the basic interest in fruitful economic relations with Japan and the continuation of the long-term aspiration for the retrieval of the disputed territory by China can still be assured. Obviously, a long-term irredentist aspiration entails no fixed time limit and Janus-like positioning may continue indefinitely. But there

are limits to the party-state's freedom of action, limits that are becoming narrowed down, increasing the tensions of holding such Janusian positions.

The critical problem lies in the socioeconomic sphere in China. If a new crisis were to take place in a situation of major failure and collapse of the Chinese economy, especially if the failure is caused by corruption and economic mismanagement by party leaders, it would clearly be more difficult to stifle public protests before they become a threat to the party-state, especially if nationalist movements fuse various discontented groups under the banner of nationalism. However, even such a major crisis may not be enough to trigger such a wave, as the censorship system could be used in an attempt to curb a broader dissemination of knowledge about the causes of China's domestic problems. Therefore the second critical factor besides major economic failure caused by the incumbent leadership would be a breakdown of unity among leaders as happened in the spring of 1989. If factions within the CCP use nationalism to challenge and attack (persons in) the current leadership for not defending China's core interests with sufficient vigour, a real threat may develop, and the party-state's efforts to maintain legitimacy by stirring up nationalism may backfire.

This study of popular nationalism in China's East China Sea policy will finish with an observation on the role of history in Asian and Western foreign policies. Kishore Mahbubani, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore and an incisive observer of contrasts between Asian and Western diplomatic styles, has noted that China's leaders can 'switch off' the past (Mahbubani, 2010). This study demonstrates the limits to Mahbubani's observation when it comes to Sino-Japanese relations. Even though China's pragmatic leaders have displayed an impressive ability to implement Janus-like policies, they have not been able wholly to switch off the past in the way Mao and his diplomatic master, Chou Enlai, could. Otherwise expressed, the totalitarian Chinese system under Mao could switch off the past more easily than today's leaders of a more democratic, but still authoritarian, political system. Here Max Weber's famous observation: "It is not true that good can follow only good and evil only evil" – cited by Mahbubani (2010: 39) – is pertinent.



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