

The China-Japan Tango, Talks, and Time By Jean-Marc F. Blanchard

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Professor Dong Wang (“China-Japan Relations-Now What?”, *PacNet* #6, Jan. 17, 2013) is to be applauded for distilling a number of frictions bedeviling the China-Japan relationship, identifying root causes of these frictions, and making a number of policy proposals. Even so, other issues require consideration if Sino-Japanese relations are to be put on a sounder footing, a goal to which all should aspire given the fallout of a true bilateral deep freeze or, worse, militarized conflict. First, policymakers in both countries need to understand that “their” tango includes more countries than just themselves. Second, they need to appreciate that talks are insufficient and may even be counterproductive. Third, they need to strive for more wide-ranging and creative options to deal with the history (time) problem.

Much policy thinking about Sino-Japanese tensions narrowly focuses on the two East Asian giants. Yet, the China-Japan dyad is nested within or overlaps with other regions, including Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. What happens in these regions invariably spills over into the China-Japan dyad and vice-versa. For example, Japan’s efforts to bolster political ties with Southeast Asia and naval ties with India are threatening to China while China’s political, economic, and military backing for the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is, at a minimum, troublesome and, at a maximum, alarming to Japan. China’s naval frictions with the US in China’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) or spats over the Diaoyu Islands with Japan bring the US and Japan closer together which, in turn, increases China’s insecurities which, in turn, gives China more reason to reject a US presence in its EEZ and to push harder on the Diaoyu Islands. The key point for Chinese and Japanese decision makers, if they want to stabilize and improve bilateral ties, is that they need to be sensitive to the consequences of what they do beyond their immediate relationship.

It is commonplace to suggest additional high-level meetings, bureaucratic dialogues, and people-to-people exchanges to deal with bilateral distrust, hostile nationalist sentiments, and a lack of goodwill. However, it is hard not to be skeptical about the value of such proposals. There have been dozens of meetings, dialogues on energy, Africa, economics, fisheries, and the East China Sea, joint history studies, military visits, and extensive cultural and educational exchanges involving thousands if not tens of thousands. Nonetheless, public opinion surveys have not improved, nationalist sentiments have not dissipated, and, aside from the

2008 agreement on the East China Sea, there has been a dearth of progress on major issues.

One can ask what harm there is in more talk, dialogue, and exchange? The harm is that the focus on building “understanding” through talks, dialogues, and exchanges detracts from the pursuit of standstill, force reduction, or economic accords that might reduce heat and minimize the risk of accidents and conflict.

A second downside to relying on meetings, dialogues, and exchanges is that they build expectations for progress which, when unmet, can result in more animosity, cynicism, and distrust. The recommendation, then, is for China and Japan to deemphasize talking and to move to specific ways in which they can reduce the risk of accidents, show concrete results to their constituents, and realize agreements that bind the two countries further and demonstrate the value of cooperation.

There can be no denying that China suffered greatly from Japan’s actions in the 1930s and 1940s. Chinese elites and the Chinese people are dismayed (disgusted in some cases) by Japanese who deny atrocities such as the Nanjing Massacre or who think Japan need make no apologies regarding the comfort women issue. As Professor Wang and other Chinese and Western commentators have noted, Japan would benefit from greater sensitivity and self-reflection on these matters.

Informed Japanese, though, cannot comprehend why Chinese continue to make such a big deal of history given that neither a majority of Japanese elites nor the Japanese public deny what was done. Additionally, not only has Japan been remorseful, but, in their view, Japan has given numerous apologies and made various amends. Moreover, they fail to grasp why China can slight statements by Chinese academics, officials, or soldiers questioning Japan’s sovereignty over Okinawa or calling for war over the Diaoyu Islands as extremist or unofficial while routinely deeming statements by Japanese extremists as evidence of a militaristic Japanese culture or official policy. Finally, many Japanese do not understand why China, which on, one hand, is trying to improve understanding, is, on the other hand, continuing to feed its public a steady diet of Chinese film, television, and other media about Japanese aggression in the 1930s and 1940s. In short, the realm of history is one where Beijing and Tokyo *both* need to take measures as well as investigate creative solutions.

The China-Japan dyad is a complicated one and the nature of their frictions – territorial and maritime quarrels, security competition, and regional rivalries – present daunting challenges to those aiming to stabilize and warm the relationship. What makes things more alarming is the view held by some that there is no possibility of conflict over issues such as the Diaoyu Islands because they are uninhabited rocks while Sino-Japanese economic or national interests are much

greater. In fact, however, the Diaoyu Islands are not just uninhabited rocks, but islands involving history, nationalism, energy, domestic politics, and prestige. Moreover, these and other interests have been impelling China and Japan to take increasingly aggressive actions that risk serious accidents. It is critical that China and Japan move back from this possibility. They can only do so if they consider not only the issues raised in Professor Wang's piece, but also learn to think holistically about their relationship, to move beyond talking, and to addressing their history problem creatively.

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