

# Background and Causes of Deterioration of Sino-Japanese Relations<sup>\*</sup>

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The political relations between China and Japan have deteriorated remarkably in recent years, even giving rise to the danger of a military competition. Feelings the people of the two countries hold towards the other have also plunged to an all-time low. Radical remarks flooded traditional media and the Internet. Sentimental and moralist comments in both countries have contributed to the appearance of such a situation. In contrast, objective and rational voices are not sufficiently loud to be heard. How have the Sino-Japanese relations deteriorated? What are the major causes of such deterioration? A matter-of-fact analysis of such questions is conducive to a clearer understanding of the difficulties and challenges the Sino-Japanese relations face now and in the future. This article will first review the historical background

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of the fluctuations and deterioration of the Sino-Japanese relations since the end of the Cold War before making a tentative study of the causes of such changes at both domestic and international levels. Finally, a number of preliminary ideas are offered on how to comprehensively and rationally see and handle China's relations with Japan.

# I. HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF SINO-JAPANESE RELATIONS SINCE THE END OF THE COLD WAR

Sino-Japanese relations fluctuated between friendship and friction and between cooling down and rewarming since the end of the Cold War. On the one hand, mutual distrust and differences in political and security aspects has deepened with the passing of time, even giving rise to a trend of confrontation. On the other hand, economic and trade interaction as well as personnel exchanges have kept increasing between the two countries, and non-governmental interchange has also grown ever closer. Generally speaking, however, the bilateral relations of the two countries has turned increasingly worse over the past two decades or more. Starting in the 1990s, this trend of deterioration has gone through three turning points, i.e., 1996, 2005 and 2010. The Taiwan Straits Crisis in 1996 brought to light the structural contradictions in relation to security between China and Japan. Meanwhile, the historical issue on the Japanese side began to catch greater public attention in China, while the theory of “China threat” also started to spread among Japan's elite and public.<sup>1</sup> In 2005, massive anti-Japanese demonstrations took place in China, and the impact of public opinion on Sino-Japanese relations turned salient. In 2010, the year when China exceeded Japan to become the second largest economy in the world, a trawler collision incident occurred in the surrounding waters of the Diaoyu Islands. The shift in power balance between China and Japan lifted the two countries' divergence over particular issues to strategic competition and confrontation. Below is a staged review of the evolving Sino-Japanese relations during this period.

### 1. 1992-1996: From Friendship to Friction

1992 is the first year after the Cold War ended and the 20th anniversary of the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations. Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Japan in April and the emperor of Japan visited China in October, marking that Sino-Japanese relations reached its best. Amidst this friendly atmosphere, satisfactory development was witnessed in Sino-Japan trade, cultural and non-governmental exchanges. After 1993, however, differences and frictions appeared on a number of issues, such as those on Taiwan, history and the reinforcement of the US-Japan alliance. In 1995-1996, in particular, the relations between the two countries chilled.

Tension first rose on the Taiwan issue. In February 1993, the Japanese government allowed Qian Fu (Frederick Chien), the “foreign minister” of the Taiwan authority, to visit Japan. Afterwards in September 1994, Xu Lide (Hsu Li-the), the “vice president of the Executive Yuan” of Taiwan, attended the Hiroshima Asian Games. Both events naturally provoked strong discontent and protests from the Chinese side. Regarding the history issue, in 1995 the then Japanese Prime Minister Murayama Tomiichi gave a speech on the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, in which he expressed profound reflections on and sincere apology for Japan’s aggression and wrongdoings in the war. However, the Japanese Diet disapproved a resolution that aimed to sincerely reflecting on the history of aggression due to the obstruction from some Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lawmakers. In 1996, Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryutaro’s visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, where 14 Class A war criminals are enshrined, brought criticisms from China. Meanwhile, the increasing activeness of Japanese Right-wing forces drew more and more attention. In 1994, cabinet members Nagano Shigeto and Sakurai Shin made statements to beautify Japan’s wartime history. In 1995, a number of the Diet members engaged in the publication of a book titled *Daitoasen no Sokatsu* (Summary of the Great East Asian War), denying the crime of aggression. In the following year, the *Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho o Tsukuru Kai* (Japan Society for History Textbook Reform) was founded, aiming at rewriting

Japan's wartime history. Consequently, the development of Sino-Japanese relations lost its momentum.

At the same time, China's nuclear tests and the Taiwan Straits Crisis raised Japan's wariness. Responding to China's two nuclear tests in May and August 1995, the Japanese government froze its Official Development Assistance (ODA) to China as a protest. The Japanese prime minister publicly expressed his concern on China's military exercises in the Taiwan Strait during March and April 1996. Public perception of China in Japan changed accordingly. According to the annual opinion poll conducted by the Japanese Cabinet Office, in 1996 Japanese people who hold a favorable view of China was outnumbered by those who do not for the first time since the survey was started in 1978.

Furthermore, the East Asia policy of the United States during this period also contributed to the intensification of the tension between China and Japan. In April 1996, Japan and the US released the Japan-US Joint Declaration on security during US President Clinton's visit to Japan. *The Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation* in 1997 confirmed US-Japan military cooperation in "situations in areas surrounding Japan". China criticized this move as revealing the Cold War mentality of the US and Japan, and demanded them to confirm that "situations in areas surrounding Japan" do not cover Taiwan. Additionally, since July 1996 Japanese Right-wing activists kept landing on the Diaoyu Islands and built a lighthouse there, which led to protests from the Chinese government and public.<sup>2</sup>

In short, Sino-Japanese relations dropped from its peak with increasing political frictions in this period. Yet, on the other hand, trade and economic relations between the two countries maintained the momentum of rapid development. For this first time, Sino-Japanese relations experienced the situation of "economic closeness but political estrangement (*Zhengleng Jingre*)".<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that, although the Taiwan Straits crisis during 1995 and 1996 stemmed from divergence over specific issues, it revealed the structural contradiction between China and Japan (or between China and the Japan-US alliance) on security issues in East Asia.

## **2. 1997-2000: Rewarming of Relations and Divergence in Strategic Perceptions**

From 1997 to 2000, mutual visits by political leaders of China and Japan signaled a rewarming in bilateral relations. Yet, the cracks between the two countries on such issues as the US-Japan alliance, Taiwan, history and the Diaoyu Islands aggravated rather than mitigated.

In October 1996, China announced its decision to sign the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and stop nuclear tests. As a response, the Japanese government announced to restart ODA to China in February 1997. In September 1997, Prime Minister Hashimoto visited China, during which he visited the “9·18” Historical Museum, making him the first Japanese prime minister to visit northeast China since the end of World War II.

In November 1997, Chinese Premier Li Peng visited Japan and signed a new fishery agreement with Japan. In February 1998, General Chi Haotian visited Japan. It was the first official visit to Japan by a Chinese defense minister. In the following May, Japanese Defense Minister Fumio Kyūma visited China and reached a series of agreements with China on promoting defense exchanges. In November 1998, President Jiang Zemin paid a state visit to Japan. The two sides issued the China-Japan Joint Declaration on Building a Partnership of Friendship and Cooperation for Peace and Development during the visit, which was considered the third political document of historic significance in the bilateral relations. Against such a backdrop of exchanges of high-level visits, continuous development was observed in economic and trade cooperation as well as cultural exchanges, indicating a positive trend in bilateral relations.

In 1999, the two countries reached an agreement on China's accession to join the World Trade Organization (WTO), which was the first WTO agreement sealed by China and a developed country.<sup>4</sup> In July 1999, Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi Keizō paid a visit to China, and in return Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji visited Japan in October 2000.

However, differences and distrust between the two countries turned increasingly apparent despite the temporary rapprochement

in bilateral relations. In July 1997, Japan and the US issued new guidelines for defense cooperation, which actually included Taiwan under the US-Japan security treaty. China strongly protested against it as interference in Chinese internal affairs. During Jiang's visit to Japan in 1998, the Chinese side expressed discontent with Japan's refusal to clearly state its apology for aggression in the joint declaration, while the Japanese government and public felt tired being required to apologize repeatedly, and some even suspected that China was simply playing the "history card".<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Nishimura Shingo, a Japanese Diet member, landed on the Diaoyu Islands in 1997. *Pride*, a movie totally negating the Tokyo Trials, was put on screen in Japan in 1998. In 2000, a new history textbook edited by the Japan Society for History Textbook Reform was approved by the Japanese Ministry of Education. Accordingly, mutual perceptions and feelings on the societal level were negatively affected.

It is noteworthy that, although China and Japan were both committed to developing friendly and cooperative relations in this period, the two countries' strategic perceptions were divergent: a gap existed between them in their views on the prospect of the post-Cold War international order. China tended to believe that the international order was becoming multi-polarized, while Japan inclined to maintain a global order dominated by developed countries, such as the US, Europe and Japan along with an East Asian regional order centered on the US-Japan alliance.<sup>6</sup>

### **3. 2001-2006: Deterioration of Relations and Influence of Public Opinion**

In April 2001, Koizumi Junichiro became prime minister of Japan. During his administration, the political relationship between China and Japan and the public perceptions of each other dramatically deteriorated, mainly due to Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine for six consecutive years. In April 2005, the Chinese people's accumulated anger reached its climax, and demonstrations broke out in many Chinese cities to express opposition to Japan's bid for permanent membership in the UN Security Council, to Japanese leader's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine,



and to the revisionist history textbooks approved in Japan. Images of the protests were exposed to the Japanese public through media reports, arousing considerable sensation in Japan. Opinion polls showed that mutual impressions between the two peoples reached a historical low.

The deterioration during this period was intensified by the simultaneous occurrence of several problems that had long disturbed the bilateral relations. In April 2001, Lee Tenghui was permitted to visit Japan with the excuse of seeking “medical treatment,” which deepened Chinese distrust of Japan on the Taiwan issue. China froze high-level exchanges and cancelled its warships visit to Japan as well as a security dialogue as countermeasures. In February 2005, China pronouncedly objected the joint statement of the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee (2+2), which included the Taiwan issue into “common strategic objectives”. Frictions over the East China Sea and the Diaoyu Islands occurred occasionally as well. However, it is also noticeable that since 2004 China and Japan conducted multiple rounds of negotiation on the East China Sea issue, and established constructive mechanisms to explore solutions.

With the exacerbation of political relations, several incidents added fuel to the hostility between the two peoples. By the hype of Japanese media and politicians, the Shenyang Consulate-General Incident in 2002 created a negative image of China in Japanese public opinion. Casualties caused by chemical weapons left by the Japanese military during wartime in Qiqihar kindled again the hatred of Chinese people against Japan. Additionally, some Chinese soccer fans’ hostilities against Japan in the Asian Cup worsened the Japanese people’s perception of China.

In contrast to the deteriorating political relations, trade and economic cooperation and people-to-people exchange enjoyed continuing and speedy development. With China’s further opening up after joining the WTO, the Japanese economy benefited a great deal from the boost of Chinese demand. China replaced the US as the largest exporter to Japan in 2002. In this way, the Sino-Japanese relations encountered again the situation of “economic closeness yet political estrangement”. It is worth noting that the 2005 anti-

Japanese protests in China marked the increasingly prominent impact of public opinion on China's Japan policy, and that with the rise of Right-wing activists within the ruling LDP, nationalism among Japanese elites grew remarkably stronger.

#### **4. 2006-2009: Temporary Rapprochement and Potential Instability**

After lying at its nadir for five and a half years, Sino-Japanese relations came to a turning point in 2006. In the later stage of the Koizumi administration, voices calling for reconsidering Japan's China policy arose in both domestic public opinion and the LDP. In October 2006, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited China soon after he took office in September. His visit ended the long-lasting stalemate in the relations between the two countries, and was regarded as an "ice-breaking trip". During Abe's visit, the two countries agreed to build a "mutually beneficial relationship based on common strategic interests." Reciprocal visits of the leaders of the two countries continued afterwards. In April 2007, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao made his "ice-thawing trip" to Japan, followed by his Japanese counterpart Fukuda Yasuo's "spring-herald trip" to China in December 2007 and Chinese President Hu Jintao's "warm-spring trip" to Japan in May 2008 — all of which brought a positive impact on the bilateral relations. During Hu's visit to Japan, the China-Japan Joint Statement on Comprehensive Promotion of a "Mutually Beneficial Relationship based on Common Strategic Interests," the fourth important political document in Sino-Japanese relations, was signed. The reciprocal visits of the leaders boosted the development of relations in trade, defense and culture.

After the Sichuan earthquake in May 2008, Japanese Prime Minister Fukuda immediately sent his message of condolences to China and dispatched a rescue team to the disaster-stricken area, which was the first foreign rescue team admitted by the Chinese government. In June, the two countries reached principled consensus on the East China Sea issue through negotiation. When Hatoyama Yukio became the prime minister in 2009, he emphasized the importance of Asia in Japan's diplomacy and adopted a friendly policy towards China. During Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Japan



in 2010, the two parties agreed to start negotiation to implement the principled consensus on the East China Sea issue.

During this period, the bilateral relationship generally moved towards rapprochement. Yet, destabilizing and disturbing factors remained. The consensus to jointly exploit resources in the East China Sea has never been put into implementation. The diplomatic notions put forward by the Shinzo Abe and Aso Taro administrations, such as the so-called “value-oriented diplomacy,” “the arc of freedom and prosperity,” and “the quadrilateral alliance (of Japan, the U.S., Australia, and India),” revealed intentions to contain China, which naturally caused concerns on the Chinese side. Besides, the occurrence of accidental events also contributed the increasing friction between China and Japan. The poisoned frozen dumpling incident in late 2007 and early 2008, in particular, caused an uproar in Japan. While the Chinese perception of Japan was improving at the time, the feelings of the Japanese towards China went down because of this incident. This also indicates that factors affecting Sino-Japanese relations have become increasingly diverse and complicated.

### **5. 2010-Present: Confrontation**

With the step-down of Prime Minister Hatoyama in 2010, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)’s foreign and security policies returned to the old track of the LDP era. Japan’s domestic politics also blew hot and cold under the pressure of conflict between the ruling party and the opposition and the power struggle within the DPJ. In September 2010, a Chinese fishing trawler collided with two Japanese coast guard vessels in the surrounding waters of the Diaoyu islands. The Japanese government arrested the Chinese captain and brought the case to Japan’s domestic legal process, triggering a chain of effects in diplomatic relations between Beijing and Tokyo. The incident again instigated anti-Japanese demonstrations in China. And in Japan, the issue was politically exploited and hyped up by the media. The DPJ government leaned to the American side diplomatically as a result, and the chilly relationship between Washington and Tokyo caused by the Futenma military base issue warmed up a bit. It can be said that

since 2010 the territorial dispute has replaced the history issue to become the central obstacle in Sino-Japanese relations. Additionally, in the same year China's GDP surpassed that of Japan. Such shifts in the balance of power changed both countries' perceptions on specific issues, and the divergence over the territorial issue ascended to strategic competition.

The relationship chilled again after the ship collision incident until the occurrence of the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011. Bilateral relations improved through cooperation on disaster relief. The Chinese government promptly dispatched a rescue team and the Chinese media gave great attention to the disaster and reported in a positive way. The calmness, solidarity and obedience to order of the Japanese people won respect and admiration among the Chinese public. On March 18, Chinese President Hu Jintao went to the Japanese Embassy in Beijing to give his condolence, and on May 21 Premier Wen Jiabao visited the disaster-stricken area of Japan. Prime Minister Kan's thank-you letter was later published in a number of Chinese newspapers, including the *People's Daily*.

Nevertheless, the influence and duration of such positive interaction between China and Japan was quite limited. The confrontation over the Diaoyu Islands continued. In January 2012, the Japanese government decided to name 39 unnamed islets, including some affiliated to the Diaoyu Islands, prompting the Chinese side to take countermeasures. In April, Ishihara Shintaro, then the governor of Tokyo, drew a great amount of attention due to his plan to purchase the islands from their private owner. In July, Prime Minister Noda announced that the Japanese government would consider transferring the ownership of the islands to the central government. Then on September 11, the central government signed a contract with the landowner to "nationalize" the islands. China took a series of strong countermeasures, including announcing the baseline of the Diaoyu Islands and carrying out regular patrols in waters surrounding them. Anti-Japanese demonstrations spread to dozens of Chinese cities and some turned out to be violent. As a result, mutually held images between the two countries plummeted unprecedentedly. Noticeably, the American

policy towards the Sino-Japanese island dispute is that the US does not take a position on the sovereignty of the islands but does take the position that the islands are under Japanese administration and thereby fall into the scope of the US-Japan security treaty.

In the end of 2012, with a landslide victory of the LDP in the Lower House election, Shinzo Abe returned to power and adopted nationalistic foreign and security policies. The Sino-Japanese confrontation over the islands intensified with increasing risk of an armed conflict. In November 2013, China declared its Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, which includes the Diaoyu Islands. The Japanese government protested strongly and demanded China to revoke its measures. In December that year, Shinzo Abe visited the Yasukuni Shrine on the one-year anniversary of his cabinet, which not only provoked denunciation from China and South Korea, but also caused disappointment from the US. After that, China and Japan engaged in an unprecedented war of words in international media and the tension between the two countries continues.

## II. CAUSES OF THE DETERIORATION OF SINO-JAPANESE RELATIONS

It can be concluded from the above review that, despite the significant progress made in the economic and trade, the Sino-Japanese relations after the Cold War have remained difficult and kept deteriorating in general. What caused this? So far, there have been the following major explanations: (1) From a geopolitical perspective, it has been held that the growth of China's military strength, the transformation of the Japanese defense establishment and the reinforcement of the US-Japan alliance have contributed to the security dilemma between China and Japan. (2) From the historical point of view, it has been held that the grievances and disputes over historical issues have aggravated mutual misunderstanding and fear towards the each other.<sup>7</sup> (3) From the point of view of domestic politics, it has been concluded that the growing Right deviation in Japan's politics and the increasing nationalism in China have played a major role in the deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations;<sup>8</sup> (4) It has been held that it is the differences

and changes in decision-making systems of both countries that have caused delays, misperceptions and miscalculations in a series of issues.<sup>9</sup> (5) It has been held that it is the interaction between the two countries and its results that have accumulated aggravated to mutual suspicion and distrust.<sup>10</sup> And (6) the deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations has been attributed to the involvement of the United States, thinking it is the United States that created and manipulated the tension between China and Japan in order to pursue its own strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>11</sup>

From different perspectives, the abovementioned explanations give us certain inspiration in understanding the problem. The authors of this article would argue that **the major reason for the deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations is the structural changes at both domestic and international levels, i.e., changes in both countries' domestic decision-making environment caused by the rise of public opinion and the shift in the balance of power between China and Japan in the Asia-Pacific caused by China's rise.** Against the backdrop of these two structural changes, mutual perception in both countries tends to be increasingly sentimental and polarized,<sup>12</sup> thus causing a vicious circle in the bilateral relationship.

Domestically, the influence of public opinion on the making of foreign policy has been on the rise but it is not yet steady. From the normalization of relations in 1972 to the early 1990s, Sino-Japanese relations were primarily maintained and promoted under a government-centered model. The reconciliation on history issues and the shelving of the territorial dispute were mainly achieved by rationality and

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self-restraint at the governmental level. In that period, elites in both countries largely maintained consensus on their policies towards the other, which was generally supported by the public. The mutual perceptions between the peoples remained relatively simple and, to a large extent, were led by the mainstream elite opinions. However, this government-centered model of Sino-Japanese relations began to face serious challenges after the end of the Cold War.

In China, the development of the reform and opening up has brought about a diversification in interests and values, and public opinion has rapidly ascended to become an important force influencing policymaking. Driven by a great-power mentality, some people have criticized flexibility in China's foreign policies as weakness or inactivity; they are no longer satisfied by diplomatic protests in words, but instead demand the government to adopt coercive measures to force the other side to concede. They hold that anything short of this could not be regarded success in foreign policy. Henry Kissinger calls this sort of thinking "triumphalism," which may not be endorsed by the government, but shows the unspoken words in many ongoing debates.<sup>13</sup> Regarding China's relations with Japan, those who held this view believe that, since China's power is surpassing that of Japan, and China will continue to grow powerful while Japan will continue to decline, it is not necessary for China to make compromise with Japan over any dispute and Japan will eventually acknowledge its relative weakness and shift its policy to accommodate the rise of China. Such nationalistic sentiment is not only popular among the general public but also spreads to some elite circles, even the academia. According to observation made by a Chinese scholar, since the late 1990s academic discussions have become increasingly sentimental along with the growth of China's power.<sup>14</sup>

It should be noted that in modern history China suffered greatly the aggression of Western powers and Japanese militarism; it only won independence by way of arduous war of national liberation. So, the justice of nationalism in modern China is beyond all doubt. Accordingly, the rise of nationalism in contemporary China should be understood in its historical and current background, and it should not be totally negated. But, there is also no denying

that nationalism is an irrational attitude and it often harms the country's foreign policies and international relations. The abovementioned views on Sino-Japanese relations might comply with the sentimentality of some people, but they are not based on an objective analysis of the regional structure in the Asia-Pacific and the domestic situation of Japan. When such views spread through traditional media and the Internet, the discussion about Sino-Japanese relations will turn increasingly sentimental.

Another problem associated with the sentimental tendency in the debate over China's Japan policy is the polarization of views in relation to "friendship" and "hostility". For a long time, China and the Chinese public have held the view in the understanding of Japan's history of aggression to distinguish the overwhelming majority of the Japanese people from a handful of militarists. Correspondingly, their understanding of the status quo of Sino-Japanese relations also include the two aspects of cherishment of peace and friendship and wariness against Right-wing forces in Japan. Influenced by such way of thinking, statements and actions on the Japanese side are viewed as either friendly or hostile to China. This simplistic dichotomy has made Chinese perception of Japan based more on morality and emotion than on facts and rationality. In practice, such polarized thinking has led the public either to excessive hops for cooperation<sup>15</sup> or excessive interpretation of frictions, impeding the formation of consensus and the flexible execution of established policies, beside turning the policies for handling disputes ossified and simplistic and policies promoting friendship and cooperation difficult to adopt for lack of massive support.

In Japan, the "1955 system" featuring political monopoly by the LDP ended in 1993 with the burst of the economic bubble. Under the impact of economic stagnation and political scandals, the government and the political parties lost their credibility and voters with no party affiliation substantially increased. Consequently, politicians increasingly resorted to populism. Meanwhile, decisive changes also took place in the power structure of the LDP. The Keisaikai faction<sup>16</sup> that had masterminded the normalization of relations with China and the ODA to China lost its dominant



position in the party in the early 21st century, and was replaced by the Seiwakai faction,<sup>17</sup> the right wing faction among the conservatives is generally pro-America and anti-China. The Koizumi administration, in particular, spared no effort to weaken the Keiseikai faction and break the dominance of bureaucrats in foreign policy making. As a result, the consensus on China policies among Japanese decision makers no longer exists, and the tacit agreements reached between Japan and China are hard to sustain.<sup>18</sup> The rise of Shinzo Abe to power marked the dominance of the Japanese political arena by a new generation of political elites, referred by some scholars the “Heisei Generation.”<sup>19</sup> Most of them were born in the 1960s and 1970s and began to come to fame in the 1990s. They themselves have not experienced World War II and the hard days after of war, and lack understanding, a guilty conscience and reflections of the crimes committed by the Japanese militarists; some of them even attempt to beautify Japan’s history of aggression so as to revitalize the self-confidence of the Japanese nation. Furthermore, they take Japan’s economic success after the 1960s for granted and carry on modern Japan’s sense of superiority over and contempt for its Asian neighbors. In terms of foreign and security policies, they try to shake off the constraints of postwar pacifism and turn Japan into a “normal state” that can engage in war, so as to gain for Japan the imagined national dignity and international status.

Although this new generation of Japanese political elites sometimes appear to be open-minded and pragmatic and their political stands vary from one to another, for the moment they still carry on, to a large extent, the Japanese tradition of conservative politics and display a strong nationalistic tendency. In terms of policy towards China, some of the politicians have been playing up the so-called “theory of China threat” to fan up public sentiment in Japan, attempting to achieve a right-deviating realignment of political forces in Japan and consolidate their political power. Joseph Nye calls this trend populist nationalism, which he believes could win votes at home but antagonize neighbors abroad.<sup>20</sup>

In sum, the rise of public opinion has broken the government-centered model of Sino-Japanese relations. Although the specific

ways the public opinion affects foreign policy making differ in China and Japan, the ascendance of popular nationalism in China and the spread of populist politics in Japan have changed the previous situation in which like-minded political elites dominated the foreign policy making. Public opinion is dynamic and diverse, and thereby brings more uncertainty to relations among nations.

Viewed from the international perspective, China's rise and Japan's move towards a "normal state" mean that both the countries are becoming increasingly more confident and assertive in their foreign policies. But, as the foreign policies of both countries are still in transitional periods and embody more unpredictability, they help increase the distrust and sense of competition between China and Japan. The Taiwan Straits Crisis in the 1990s and the recent Diaoyu Islands crisis are precisely manifestations of such structural changes. Although the former mainly involved the relations between China and the United States, it already revealed the strategic contradiction between China and the US-Japan alliance. The latter is but a direct confrontation between China and Japan on sovereignty, territory and strategic interests.

The American policy undoubtedly serves as a significant external factor. But, the United States played different roles on different issues in Sino-Japanese relations. The US policy towards East Asia in the 1990s was to safeguard its dominant position in East Asia after the Cold War by way of reinforcing the US-Japan alliance to cope with the Korean nuclear problem and the Taiwan issue. Japan, though brought in the strategy of the United States, was reluctant to be dragged into a conflict with China. Given the recent US strategic rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific (the pivot to Asia), the importance of the US-Japan alliance and American military presence in Japan has become outstanding again. At the same time, however, Washington is also wary about the rise of Right-wing forces in Japanese politics, worrying that Japan's provocation would intensify regional tension and undermine the US strategic interests. In contrast to its position during the Taiwan Straits Crisis, the United States has for quite a long time adopted the noncommittal and non-interference attitude, reluctant to let an issue of history damaging its own security interests. However, when tension in

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In order to pursue its own interests, the United States sometimes makes use of and at other times constrain the Sino-Japanese tension, thus playing a mixed role of both destabilizing and stabilizing the situation between China and Japan. It is unrealistic for either China or Japan to wish to pull the United States to its own side against the other.

Northeast Asia rapidly grow due to the North Korean nuclear problem and territorial disputes, Japan's provocative words and deeds on the history issue have undermined the American policy goal of maintaining stability in the region. This explains Washington's recent actions to restrain Tokyo in this regard. Generally speaking, **in order to pursue its own interests, the United States sometimes makes use of and at other times constrain the Sino-Japanese tension, thus playing a mixed role of both destabilizing and stabilizing the situation between China and Japan. It is unrealistic for either China or Japan to wish to pull the United States to its own side against the other.**

To conclude, the domestic societies of both China and Japan as well as the structure in East Asia are undergoing a

period of transformation, which increases the uncertainty politically and in foreign policy. The increasing sentimental tendency and polarization in policy debates have narrowed the space for discussion and thinking, unfavorable for both countries to form comprehensive and balanced views. These are basically the causes for the deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations in both subjective and objective dimensions.

### III. SOME THOUGHTS ON CHINA'S JAPAN POLICY

For either China or Japan, it is difficult and prolonged challenge how to understand and define their bilateral relations and how to properly manage their un-reconciled past and uncertain future. It is beyond this article's scope to provide specific policy recommendations. Below, the authors will venture certain

preliminary thoughts from China's perspective in the hope to promote further discussion of these questions.

First, it is necessary for China to rationally understand its own nationalism and develop a new model of positive interaction between public opinion and foreign policy. On the part of the Chinese public, it is essential to learn to view the outside world in a more objective and balanced way and avoid resorting to simplistic and sentimental remarks and actions. For the Chinese government, it is essential to incorporate the reasonable elements in public opinion into its foreign policy making, and proceed from the long-term interests of the state to treat popular appeals instead of catering to or being kidnapped by public opinion for short-term interests. Enhancing transparency and public participation in foreign policy decision making can help to achieve these goals. In recent years, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China has made efforts to strengthen interaction with the general public through radio broadcasting, online dialogues, micro-blogs, micro-messages and other means. In a long-term view, only by objective information and open discussion is it possible to cultivate more rational public opinion, and only by cultivating rational public opinion is it possible to win widespread and lasting support for China's Japan policy.

Second, it is necessary for China to objectively assess the changing politics in Japan. During the first two decades after the normalization of diplomatic relations, there are in Japan both political/economic leaders who pragmatically supported rendering economic aid to China, and liberal intellectuals and politicians who were willing to sincerely reflect on Japan's history of aggression against China. The attitudes of both had got widespread resonance from the Japanese public. Since the 1990s, however, a change has taken in the situation. With both pragmatists and liberals gradually backing down from the arena of history, the politics in Japan has been evolved towards increasing conservatism. Given pressure from all the economic and social problems, this trend in Japanese politics sees no change in the short and medium run. Moreover, in an era when the voters have no confidence whatsoever in any political party and government, it is more likely for the political leaders of Japan to resort to populism and nationalism to win support from

the public. Under such circumstances, China will have to search for new approaches to deal with a Japan that appears less friendly. In this regard, the tradition of people-to-people diplomacy between China and Japan can serve as an example. If overall consensus can be reached between China and Japan at the governmental level in the short-term, it may be advisable to make more efforts in promoting exchanges at the societal level. After all, there are different voices among Japanese political elites, and the attitude of the Japanese public towards China is far from monolithic. Only through the increasing engagement is it possible to get an accurate understanding the *status quo* and future of Japan as well as the Sino-Japanese relations.

Third, it is necessary for China to have an overall grasp of the general trend of changes of international relations in East Asia. Both China's rise to the status of a regional or even global power and Japan's shift to the status of a "normal state" represent the general trend of global development. In face of the rapid rise of China's strength and influence, Japan and China's other neighboring countries indeed harbor misgivings. Though there are some misunderstandings and biased views, the influence of the "theory of China threat" will die hard in the foreseeable future and the psychology to guard against China in the neighboring countries will be there for a long time to come. For moves made by the United States, Japan and other Asian countries to strengthen military deployment and security cooperation, it is necessary that China keeps vigilant. Yet, it should take precaution not to over-interpret them as "hedging against China" and creating a so-called "self-fulfilling prophesy". On the other hand, China should see that at the back of Japan's appeal for "normal state" status are both the nationalistic complex of the Right-wingers but also Japan's search for a new national identity and international role after the Cold War. The former is detrimental to peace and stability in the region, while the latter gives expression to a kind of consensus in Japan. China's opposition without making a distinction between the two may abet the trend of extreme nationalism in the country. Furthermore, China should see that, although relations with China might have grown more important for the United States than its

relations with Japan, the US-Japan alliance remains the cornerstone of America's East Asia policy and the key to maintain American presence and predominance in the region, as well as a policy instrument for the United States to address uncertainty caused by China's rise. In this context, **if a conflict were to break out between China and Japan, the United States, Japan and some other countries would further strengthen their security relations and even build an Asian version of NATO, a scenario that would inevitably harm China's strategic interests.**<sup>21</sup> Hence, it is urgent for China to calmly observe and assess the evolving trend of international structure in the region and avoid hasty actions that could prove to be counterproductive.

In summary, the domestic politics in both China and Japan and the international order in East Asia are undergoing profound transition. In this transitional period, uncertainties will inevitably increase and thereby bring about more frictions and collusions. The critical question, therefore, is how to manage differences and avoid conflict or confrontation. In understanding and handling complicated Sino-Japanese relations, rationality should prevail sensation, and facts should prevail moralism. Only when both parties calm down and find out the sources of their problems can they create a favorable environment for solving any problems.

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1 For summary and discussion of public opinion surveys and the changing mutual images between China and Japan reflected thereof, see Li Yu, “Zhongri bangjiao zhengchanghua sishi nianlai zhongri xianghu renshi de bianhua [Changes in Mutual Understandings between China and Japan in the 40 Years since Normalization of Diplomatic Relations],” *Yatai Yanjiu Luncun* [Papers on Asia-Pacific Studies], Vol. 9, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2013, pp.1-26.

2 Kazuko Mori, *Sino-Japanese Relations: from Postwar to New Era* (translated by Xu Xianfen from Japanese into Chinese), Beijing: Social Science Academic Press, 2009, pp.118-124.

3 In the mid-1990s, Chinese scholars began to use the term of “economic closeness yet political estrangement” in academic settings. For instance, when interviewed by the *Zhongguo Daxuesheng* magazine, Professor Jin Xide pointed out, “Since the normalization of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations in the 1970s, China and Japan experienced a period of friendliness and cooperation based on ‘peaceful and friendly’ policies. However, nowadays the Sino-Japan relations are facing new challenges, which can be described as ‘economic closeness yet political estrangement’ and ‘mutual distrust’.” (“Zhongri qingnian xianghu liaojie ma? [Do Chinese and Japanese Youth Understand Each Other?],” *Zhongguo Daxuesheng*, 1997, No. 9, p.32. For other literature on “economic closeness yet political estrangement,” see Jin Xide, *Zhongri Guanxi: Sino-Japanese Relations: Thoughts on the 30th Anniversary of Normalization of Diplomatic Relations*, World Knowledge Press, 2002; Jin Xide, “Zhongri ‘zhengleng jingre’ xianxiang tanxi [On the Phenomena of Sino-Japanese ‘Economic Closeness yet Political Estrangement’],” *Riben Xuekan* (Japanese Studies), 2004, No. 5; Liu Jiangyong, China and Japan: *Changing Relations of “Economic Closeness yet Political Estrangement”* (in Chinese), Beijing, People’s Publishing House, 2007.

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5 Amamko Satoshi, “Xinshiji rizhong guanxi xinsiwei de jiangou [The Building of New Thinking for Sino-Japanese Relations in the New Century],” *Taipingyang Xuebao* [Pacific Journal], 2005, No.8.

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7 For the influence of geopolitics and history issues upon the Sino-Japanese relations, see Kent E. Calder, “China and Japan’s Simmering Rivalry,” *Foreign Affairs*, Mar/Apr 2006, Vol. 85, No. 2, pp.129-139; He Yinan, “Ripe for Cooperation or Rivalry? Commerce, Realpolitik, and War Memory in Contemporary Sino-Japanese Relations,” *Asian Security*, May 2008, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp.162-197.

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12 For the view that the discussion of Sino-Japanese relations is becoming increasingly sentimental and polarized, the authors are indebted to Professor Li Yu with the School of International Studies at Peking University.

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17 Major politicians in the Seiwakai faction include Nobusuke Kishi, Eisaku Sato, Takeo Fukuda, Yoshiro Mori, Junichiro Koizumi, Yasuo Fukuda, Shinzo Abe, Nobutaka Machimura, etc.

18 For the decline of influence of the Keiseikai faction and bureaucrats on Japan’s China policy, the authors are indebted to Sugiura Yasuyuki with the National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan.

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