

Sino-Japanese Relations: Forced Engagement or Healthy Rivalry?

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Abstract

The relations between the People's Republic of China and Japan are one of the most sophisticated and important relations in the contemporary world. Both states, at present, are the world's second and third-largest economies and bilateral trade between them well exceeds above the US \$300 billion. The phrase 'Cold Politics and Hot Economics' have often been used in contemporary literature to characterise the Sino-Japanese relations. Indeed, there have been many differences and contentious issues between China and Japan, and their political relations in the last two decades have been quite restive. However, the economic relations between them have largely been unaffected and both states, so far, have managed to keep afloat their bilateral relations. On this backdrop, this paper seeks to describe and analyse the factors and elements which necessitate both states to engage with each other and thus enable them to maintain the momentum in their bilateral relations.

Keywords

China, Japan, Sino-Japanese Relations, Economic Interdependence, the United States, Forced Engagement, Domestic Compulsions

The relations between the People's Republic of China and Japan are one of the most sophisticated and important relations in the contemporary world. Both states, at present, are the world's second and third-largest economies and bilateral trade between them well exceeds above the US \$300 billion. The phrase 'Cold Politics and Hot Economics' have often been used in contemporary literature to characterise the Sino-Japanese relations (Dreyer, 2014). Indeed, there have been many differences and contentious issues between China and Japan, and their political relations in the last two decades have been quite restive. For instance, in 2012, over the nationalisation of the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands by Japan, the political relations between them witnessed an all-time low since the normalisation of their bilateral relations in 1972.

Further, their bitter history during the first half of the 20th century has been a cause of confrontation between them. As China's economy has grown, so has its military capability. China has been modernising and strengthening its military capability since the advent of the 21st century. Meanwhile, Japan has reinterpreted its pacifist constitution which allowed it for the first time since post-World War II to 'engage in collective self-defense' and thus, enable it to 'come to the military aid of an ally under attack'. A year later in 2015, Japan upgraded its historic Security Treaty with the US and received reaffirmation from the US that its territory and interests will be protected

including the disputed Senkaku Islands (Richter, 2016). Japan has also embarked on building an informal alliance in the form of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue implicitly directed towards countering China's growing influence and assertiveness.

Moreover, both states also differ over various issues ranging from regional order, international norms and regulations, East China Sea, South China Sea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, etc. For instance, since mid-April 2020, despite Japan's diplomatic protests Chinese coastguard vessels have been seen roaming around in the water of the disputed Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands (South China Morning Post, 2020). Additionally, China's attempt to implement the controversial 'National Security Law' in Hong Kong is viewed with suspicion in Tokyo. Japan has raised concerns over the implementation of the law and proposed to take lead in any G7 meeting on this issue (Al Jazeera, 2020).

Japan has been the biggest source of foreign direct investment to China since its 'reform and opening up in the late 1970s

Despite these differences, contentious issues, and occasional confrontations, the economic relations between China and Japan have largely been unaffected and both states, so far, have managed to keep afloat their bilateral relations. On this backdrop, this paper seeks to describe and analyse the factors and elements which

necessitate both states to engage with each other and thus enable them to maintain the momentum in their bilateral relations.

Economic Interdependence

The economy of China and Japan are well integrated and bilateral trade between them has been unabatedly growing despite occasional confrontations and political strain in their bilateral relations. From 2001 to 2006, political relations between them were increasingly strained over the issue of the then Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni Shrine – a Japanese war memorial where the deceased soldiers of the Second World War have been enshrined along with 14 war criminals. However, this political impasse between China and Japan did not have much effect on their bilateral trade (Marukawa, 2012). Similarly, in 2012, Japan's nationalisation of the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands culminated in the increasing hostility from China, and diplomatic relations were nearly stalled in the following years. However, economic engagement and bilateral trade between China and Japan largely remained unaffected.

According to the data provided by World Integrated Trade Solutions, in the year 2000, China's share in Japan's total export and import was 6.34 percent and 14.51 percent which, by the end of 2018, grew to 19.51 percent and 23.20 percent, respectively. Meanwhile, in the same period, Japan's share in China's total export and

import was 16.72 percent and 18.44 percent which decreased to 5.90 percent and 8.45 percent, respectively, owing to China's remarkable outreach to the world's other markets. However, China's total export to and import from Japan has significantly grown from USD 41.6 billion and USD 41.5 billion in 2000 to USD 147.32 billion and USD 180.4 billion in 2018, respectively (WITS, 2020). Although Japan's share in China's total export and import has decreased since 2000, its importance to China has only been increasing. Japan has been the biggest source of foreign direct investment (FDI) to China since its 'reform and opening up' in the late 1970s. During 1995-2017, Japan surpassed all foreign investors with a cumulative FDI of USD 101 billion in China (Hornung and Seguchi, 2018).



Japanese Multinational Companies (MNCs), which initially moved their production units in China to avail low cost labour-intensive Chinese production infrastructure, are now focusing on the Chinese domestic Market

China, with its vast demography and growing economy, presents a huge market for Japan. Over the years, China's unexpected economic growth rate has pulled its people out of poverty and created a new, still emerging middle class with growing spending power. Japanese Multinational Companies (MNCs), which

initially moved their production units to China to avail low cost labour-intensive Chinese production infrastructure, are now focusing on the Chinese domestic market.

Meanwhile, Japan itself is the world's third-largest economy with a vibrant market. China's emerging MNCs are gradually expanding their footprints in the Japanese market. Besides, Japan's advancement in cutting-edge technology is another inducement for China. At a time when China is being prevented from acquiring advanced technology by the US, its reliance on Japan is expected to further grow. For instance, amid rising pressure from the US over the availability of semiconductor chips (Reuters, 2020), China, in the last few years, has increased its import of semiconductor chips from Japan (Asia Times, 2020).

The integrated nature of the Asian economy, particularly the Northeast and Southeast Asian region, is another factor that binds both China and Japan with each other. As Christopher M Dent (2017) noted, after the 1997-1998 financial crisis, both the Northeast and Southeast Asian regions intensified the intra and inter-regional integration. Subsequently, ASEAN Plus Three (APT) diplomacy framework was created, along with a plethora of other regional institutions and organisations, to primarily facilitate the economic integration of the Northeast and Southeast Asian region. Similarly, within the Northeast Asian region, the economic powers China, Japan, and South Korea established Northeast Asia Trilateral Co-operation (NATC)

framework to enhance cooperation and integration among them. Over the years, these regional frameworks and organisations in Northeast and Southeast Asia have deepened the economic integration of both regions with each other including China and Japan.

This also led to an increase in trade among APT member countries. In 2018, trade among APT members increased by 6.8 percent to USD 869.1 billion (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020). The economic integration and interdependence between China and Japan are expected to further increase amid the proposed signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Pact (RCEP) at the end of 2020 (Xinhua, 2019). RCEP, a kind of free trade pact led by China and Japan, consists of 15 member states that include the 10 ASEAN member states, and Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. It primarily aims to reduce the tariff barriers, along with the other provisions, between the member states. As Ian Hutchinson noted, RCEP will significantly impact Northeast Asian countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea since China does not have a free trade agreement (FTA) with Japan and has a less effective FTA with South Korea. Talks on FTA between Japan and South Korea have also stalled over the recent impasse in their bilateral relations. Lowering tariff barriers through the RCEP mechanism will significantly increase trade and deepen the integration process among them (Hutchinson, 2020).

Strategic Vulnerabilities

Strategically, there have been prevalent distrusts and differences between China and Japan. They starkly distrust each other's intentions and motives. China's emphasis to modernize and enhance its military capabilities, in addition to its growing assertiveness in the East and South China Seas, has been a cause of concern for Japan. Meanwhile, Japan has been a traditional ally of the US and both states are also bound through defence treaty. In 2015, they further upgraded their defence pact which raised eyebrows in Beijing (Glaser and Farrar, 2015). Further, Japan's recent initiative of 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Ocean' and participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as QUAD, is seen from Beijing's perspective as an attempt to contain its influence. However, these strategic vulnerabilities, in a way, also necessitate both states to engage with each other.

Japan is well aware of the fact that disengagement with Beijing will only lead towards a more assertive China, which most likely will be detrimental to its interests

China has grown exponentially in both economic and military aspects in the last three decades. This miraculous growth has culminated in a more confident and assertive China. Since 2010, it has been posturing assertively in the waters of the East and South

China Seas. Multiple confrontations have been witnessed between China and Japan over the disputed Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands and maritime rights and interests in the East China Sea. Further, China's insistence to mould or in some cases ignore international norms (The Guardian, 2016) directly contrasts with Japan's principle of advocating and enhancing the legitimacy of international norms and regulations. As China increases its assertive nature in the region and shows implicit disdain towards international norms and regulations, Japan seeks to counter it through the policy of engagement with and balancing against China. Moreover, Japan is well aware of the fact that disengagement with Beijing will only lead towards a more assertive China, which most likely will be detrimental to its interests.

Meanwhile, Japan's recent activities in the form of building alliance and strengthening of defence pacts with other countries have been a cause of concern for China. In 2015, Japan and the United States have strengthened their defence treaty amid concerns of China's growing influence. Japan has also been striving to strengthen military co-operations and engagements with other regional like-minded states. Countries such as India and Australia have been at the forefront of Japan's increasing security co-operations (Nikkei Asian Review, 2020).

Furthermore, Japan along with the United States, India, and Australia have revived the

Quadrilateral Security Dialogue strategic informal alliance (Envall 2019). It has also been propagating for the rule of law, freedom of navigation, etc., through the formulation of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision. The core concepts of FOIP such as rule of law and freedom of navigation are implicitly directed towards China's increasing assertiveness in the region. Japan's attempt to counterbalance China's increasing power and assertiveness through the strengthening of bilateral defence agreements with the major powers and building an alliance in the Asia-Pacific region have instilled a sense of alienation within China. Given China's apparent reservation against regional strategic alliances and the bilateral defence agreements, Japan's recent activities have forced it to opt for an engagement approach.

Any assessment of Sino-Japanese relations would be incomplete without examining the involvement of the United States. Such is the presence and influence of the US in the region that it affects both China and Japan and their respective policies towards each other. In the case of Japan, it has been a close ally of the United States armed with a military alliance that was signed in 1952. Since then, Japan has primarily relied on the US for its security needs. However, in recent years, the United States' relative decline in East Asia has raised concerns in Japan over its commitment to the region (Koga, 2018).

Furthermore, the United States' recent inward-looking 'America First' approach and its increasing 'isolationist' stance have created a sense of uncertainty in Tokyo. It seems, concerned with the United States' relative decline in the region in addition to its unpredictable behaviours, Japan has decided that increasing engagement with China will serve its interests. Since 2017, Japan has been striving to pacify its relations with China, and both states, on several occasions, have affirmed to strengthen their bilateral relations and lead it into a 'new era'. Moreover, despite the Covid-19 strains, deteriorating Sino-US relations, and recurrence of issues such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, East China Sea, etc., Japan has, so far, maintained the momentum in its relations with China (Kesavan, 2020; Nakamura, 2020).

The United States' aggressive posture coupled with its explicit attempt to rally ally states against China has forced Beijing to increase its engagement with states such as Japan

As for China, the emergence of gradual Sino-US rivalry has exerted enormous pressure on it. In 2017, the United States issued its 'National Security Strategy' which explicitly outlined China as a threat to regional stability and sovereignty of nations. It further asserted that the US will 'strengthen the military relationships' with the partner states and 'encourage the development of strong defence

network with allies and partners’ (National Security Strategy, 2017: 46-47). In November 2019, the US State Department issued a document titled ‘A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision’ to counter and possibly contain China’s growing assertiveness and influence in the Asia-Pacific region. This paper called for, among many other issues, the respect of sovereignty, peaceful resolution of disputes, adherence to international law, freedom of navigation, etc., in the Asia-Pacific region. Also, it reiterated the imperative to strengthen military relations with ally states (US Department of State, 2019).

Furthermore, in July 2020, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo overtly urged the democratic countries of the ‘free world’ to avoid ‘engaging blindly’ with China but demand reciprocity, transparency, and a change in behaviour (US Department of State, 2020). Moreover, amid the heightening trade confrontation between China and the US and the latter’s attempt to prevent the former from acquiring advanced technology, Japan, as a world’s third-largest economy along with the prowess in cutting-edge advanced technology, presents invaluable resources to China. At the same time, the United States’ aggressive posture coupled with its explicit attempt to rally ally states against China has forced Beijing to increase its engagement with states such as Japan. It appears, at this juncture and possibly in foreseeable future, China cannot afford to deteriorate its relations with Japan.

Domestic Compulsion

Amidst the differences and prevalent distrust towards each other, there has been a section of political and business elites and group associations in both China and Japan who have continuously strived for the betterment of China-Japan bilateral relations. For instance, during 1945-72, when there were no direct contact and diplomatic relations between the two states, few individuals and government officials in both countries rigorously strived for the improvement of China-Japan bilateral relations that culminated in a modest amount of trade between them (Vogel, 2019; 310-312). While groups such as the Japan-China Friendship Association (JCFA) and the Chinese People’s Associations for Friendship with Foreign Countries were also created in both states to facilitate and promote the engagement and friendly relations between them.

The Japan-China Friendship Association – a Japanese civil group established in 1950 – played an important role by acting as a channel to promote friendly relations between the two states (Seraphim, 2007). Similarly, Beijing-Tokyo Forum, a joint initiative by China International Publishing Group (CIPG) and Japan’s The Genron NPO, was established in 2005. Since its inception, Beijing-Tokyo Forum has been facilitating, regular debates on issues related to China-Japan relations and exchanges between the people and elites of the two countries (The Genron NPO, 2019). Various other civil groups and organisations similar to

these have also emerged and they have been acting as a bridge of communication and promoting friendship between people and the government of both countries.

On the Hong Kong issue, Toshihiro Nikai stated ‘it was inappropriate to comment on other state’s political affairs’

Further, within the multi-party democratic polity of post-World War II Japan, the current ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has overwhelmingly dominated the government. The LDP, deemed conservative and nationalist by ideology, have also been divided into factional politics. Within the factional structure of LDP, there have always been certain factions who were friendly towards China and strived to strengthen China-Japan bilateral relations. During the time from 1972 to the early 2000s, the former Tanaka faction was deemed to have a friendly approach towards China. Since then, its influence within the LDP has waned and its pro-China stance has been taken over by the Nikai-Imai faction. Since 2017, this faction, led by party stalwarts Toshihiro Nikai and Takaya Imai, has actively promoted the improvement of China-Japan relations (Nikkei Asian Review, 2017). Earlier this year when China’s National People’s Congress (NPC) announced the implementation of the contentious National Security Law in Hong Kong, Japan openly expressed its concern but Toshihiro Nikai downplayed this development by stating that ‘it

was inappropriate to comment on other state’s political affairs’ (Nakamura, 2020).

Moreover, in the second half of the 20th century, Japan’s other major parties except for the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) were deemed to be relatively friendly towards China. At present, the biggest opposition party of Japan, the Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) –the apparent heir of the former Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) that was in government from 2009-12 – favours good relations with China. As Shamshad Khan noted in 2009, DPJ along with its suspicions on close ties with the US, also sought to ‘pursue greater accommodation with China’ (Khan, 2009).

Meanwhile, China is a single-party Communist state and the power is monopolised by the Communist Party of China (CPC). Due to its opaque working style and complete control over the state, it is difficult to explain the factional politics and point out which faction favours close ties with Japan. However, moderate individual voices within China have been raised over mending differences and establishing good relations with Japan. In 2002, former *People’s Daily* editor Ma Licheng created a controversy in China by positing ‘new thinking in Sino-Japanese relations’ through mending historical differences and accepting Japan as a major power. Scholars such as Shi Yinhong and Feng Zhaokui also expressed similar ideas about having good relations with Japan (Li, 2008: 111-113; Dreyer, 2014).

Conclusion

There exists many differences and outstanding issues between China and Japan. They differ over the regional and world order – while Japan favours and extensively promotes the current liberal world order, in contrast, China generally deems it detrimental to its interests and strives towards adjustment or altering the existing international norms and regulations.

There also exists competition and a healthy rivalry between the two states. They have been competing for influence and foreign markets in their respective region and beyond. One arena of this competition could be seen in the Southeast Asian region where both states, in recent years, have rigorously vied for influence and markets. While China has been busy with its ambitious ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ project to increase its influence, Japan has initiated its policy of ‘Quality Infrastructure’ where it provides a significant amount of loans to foreign countries.

However, despite the difference and rivalry, there have also been certain centripetal elements between China and Japan which have necessitated both states to engage with each other. Over the years, the intertwined and interdependent nature of their economic relations has forced both states to maintain the momentum in their bilateral relations. This mutual dependency will further increase amid the proposed signing of RCEP and on-going negotiations to create an FTA agreement between China, Japan, and South Korea.

Furthermore, both states seem to agree on the two major cornerstones of the present world order i.e., to promote and enhance the effectiveness of ‘multilateralism’ and ‘free trade’.

Moreover, the way they perceive each other also necessitates both states to engage with each other. Japan concerned with China’s growing stature and assertive nature has strived to increase and modernize its military capabilities and strengthen the external alliances. At the same time, it has also opted for an approach of engagement with China to counterbalance and mould its assertive behaviour. Meanwhile, China perceives Japan as the most important regional power and capable of challenging its growing influence in the region. Japan’s recent activities such as the reinterpretation of its pacifist constitution, strengthening bilateral military relations, and building an informal alliance with other states in the region have cautioned China.

Lastly, to a certain extent, the course of Sino-Japanese relations will also be affected by US policies in the region. So far, the US has unintentionally pushed both China and Japan close to each other. The United States’ aggressive posture towards China and its ‘America First’ isolationist approach has provided an impetus to both China and Japan to enhance engagement with each other. However, although there will be a clash of interests and structural issues between China and Japan, it

also appears that the aforementioned centripetal elements coupled with the changing international environment will provide an incentive to both states to enhance their engagement and cooperation with each other in the coming years. This, in turn, could also lead towards a mechanism to reduce the extent of differences and distrusts in outstanding issues such as history, territorial dispute, and strategic distrust between both states.

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