

How to Understand China's Assertiveness since 2009: Hypotheses and Policy Implications

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Since the establishment of diplomatic relations with us, the Japanese government and its leaders have repeatedly made it clear in public that Japan's war with China was an act of aggression and that Japan expressed its deep, sincere apology toward the countries it invaded. The government and the people of China give this record positive evaluation. . . . China's economic reform and modernization benefited from support by the government and the people of Japan. The people of China will long remember it.—Wen Jiabao's address to the National Diet of Japan, April 12, 2007¹

It is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend.—William Blake

Introduction

No nation in the world today has worked more strenuously than Japan to make sense of “China's assertiveness.” Much has changed in the Sino-Japanese relationship since Wen Jiabao's 2007 speech, excerpted above. Within these seven years, the Chinese government's perceptions of Japan have transformed. Japan is viewed as a nation perilously tilting toward or reverting to pre-World War II militarism; a country that never learned the “lessons” of its early twentieth-century history; and a country that actively challenges the status quo in the postwar world order. China has, in turn, reacted with diplomatic and political pressure on Japan. Of course, China's claim that Japan precipitously regresses toward the status quo ante remains to be seen.

On the other hand, many scholars have studied China's recent acts of assertiveness, particularly since 2008 and especially in the field of maritime expansion. Michael Swaine and M. Taylor Fravel define Chinese “assertiveness” as Chinese official or governmental behavior and statements that appear to threaten U.S. and allied interests or otherwise challenge the status quo in maritime Asia along China's periphery, thereby undermining Asian stability and causing concern to U.S. and other Asian leaders. They argue that subordinate governmental actors and assertive actions-reactions influenced Beijing's assertive behavior. Andrew Scobell and Scott W. Harold argue that China's assertiveness since 2008 was amplified by two domestic challenges: Chinese

¹ The excerpt is an English translation. The Chinese original text and Japanese translation are available at Akihiko Tanaka, “The World and Japan,” Database Project, Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, University of Tokyo, <http://www.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~worldjpn/documents/texts/JPCH/20070412.S1C.html> and <http://www.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~worldjpn/documents/texts/JPCH/20070412.S1J.html>.

leaders' hypersensitivity to popular nationalism and poor bureaucratic coordination among an expanding number of foreign policy actors. The International Crisis Group raises the notion of "reactive assertiveness," which means exploiting "perceived" provocations by other countries in disputed areas to change the status quo in its favor.² On the other hand, Alastair Iain Johnston argues that seven events in 2010, which are usually perceived to represent a new assertiveness in Chinese foreign policy, actually demonstrate previous patterns of Chinese assertiveness or China's desire to uphold the status quo on a particular issue, with the exception of China's behavior regarding the South China Sea.

This paper argues cautiously that China's assertiveness is indeed reactive. Countries like Japan, the largest status quo state in the region, would not necessarily need to react vigorously to other nations' "provocations." China does so because it is the biggest rising revisionist state in the region. Japan is the most mature democracy in Asia, and as a result of the freedom of speech it guarantees, discourse on both extremes of the ideological spectrum exists. China seems to "cherry-pick" from either extreme to fit its strategic intent and paint these extremes as predominant in general political Japanese discourse.

It is important to note that Japan is not the only Asian nation subject to China's strategic framing. A similar situation can be observed in China's relations with Vietnam, the Philippines, and Taiwan, all of which are China's neighbors with maritime zones contiguous with those of China.

What explains these countries' deteriorating relations with China? Björn Jerdén argues that "China's new assertiveness existed only as a social fact within the bounds of the intersubjective knowledge of a particular discourse, and not as an objectively true phenomenon external to this discourse." He thinks that the assertive narrative since 2009 is wrong; rather, it is U.S. rebalancing policy that triggered China's reaction.³ This argument suggests that neighbors of China take a hardline approach to China. This hypothesis is hard to sustain, however, because it rests on the assumption that Chinese diplomacy remains "soft," while other states have become hardline without much provocation. It is believed widely that China's diplomatic strategy has taken on a hardline tone, given recent behavior. Why is this so? This paper offers three hypotheses that contribute to explaining China's assertiveness: 1) a "rising trend" hypothesis; 2) a "cycle of deterioration and amelioration" hypothesis; and 3) a "redefinition of strategic rivals" hypothesis. The next three sections discuss each of these three hypotheses, followed by policy implications. Finally, the paper offers some concluding thoughts.

² Michael Swaine and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Assertive Behavior, Part Two: The Maritime Periphery," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 35 (September 21, 2011), <http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM35MS.pdf>; Andrew Scobell and Scott W. Harold, "An 'Assertive' China? Insights from Interviews," *Asian Security* 9, no. 2 (2013); Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?," *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013); Dingding Chen, Xiaoyu Pu, and Alastair Iain Johnston, "Debating China's Assertiveness," *International Security* 38, no. 3 (Winter 2013/14); International Crisis Group, "Dangerous Waters: China-Japan Relations on the Rocks," *Asia Report*, no. 245 (April 8, 2013), i, 12–15, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/north-east-asia/245-dangerous-waters-china-japan-relations-on-the-rocks.pdf>.

³ Björn Jerdén, "The Assertive China Narrative: Why It Is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought into It," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, (2014), <http://cijp.oxfordjournals.org/content/7/1/47.full.pdf+html>.

“Rising Trend” Hypothesis

The “rising trend” hypothesis holds that China is becoming more willing to challenge the current political order in Asia by relying on the sheer power of its increased military and economic capabilities. This hypothesis suggests that the turning point for this trend was roughly 2009, when China began to discuss reframing its diplomatic strategy by using the expression “core interests.”⁴ The 2008 global financial crisis showed the pitfalls of the “Washington consensus” and seemed to vindicate the “Beijing consensus,” especially due to China’s relatively quick recovery. This greatly emboldened the Chinese ruling elite, inducing a behavioral shift that became manifest in 2009–10.⁵ In addition, China surpassed Japan to become the world’s second-largest economy in 2010.

The “rise of China” are widely used buzzwords in both academia and policy circles. The numbers are hard to deny: China’s gross domestic product (GDP) quadrupled in the first decade of the new millennium. Great powers have inextricably deepened their economic ties with China. This growth trend is even more pronounced in the military dimension. At the 2014 National People’s Congress, Chinese authorities announced that the defense budget would increase by 12.2 percent, while the economic growth target would be 7.5 percent.⁶ China’s defense budget has increased by double digits every year since 1989, except for 2010.

The Chinese government has also invested in the cultivation of patriotism (*aiguo zhuyi*). Figure 1, comprising two graphs, demonstrates one measurable indicator of this initiative; it shows the frequency of references to the words “patriotism (*aiguo zhuyi*)” and the “Diaoyu Islands (*Diaoyudao*)” (known as the Senkaku Islands in Japanese) that appeared in both the text and headlines of articles from 1950 to 2010 in the *People’s Daily*, the official newspaper for the Communist Party of China. The graphs show a spike around 2009 and 2010 in coverage of both terms, as well as several previous spikes. While not represented on these graphs, it is interesting to note that “internationalism” was stressed more than “patriotism” in its coverage prior to the reform and opening period that began in 1978.

The Chinese government previously used the Japanese label for the Senkaku (or Sento) Islands and regarded them as part of the Okinawan island chain.⁷ The present-day “historical issues” between Japan and China began in the early 1970s when China started to question Japan’s position on the Senkaku Islands and increased in the 1980s with the growth of Chinese nationalism. Figure 1

⁴ Hiroko Maeda, *Chugoku niokeru Kokueki Ronso to Kakusinteki Rieki* [Debate on National Interest and Core Interest in China], *PHP Policy Review* 6, no. 48 (February 2, 2012): 3–9, <http://research.php.co.jp/policyreview/vol6no48.php>.

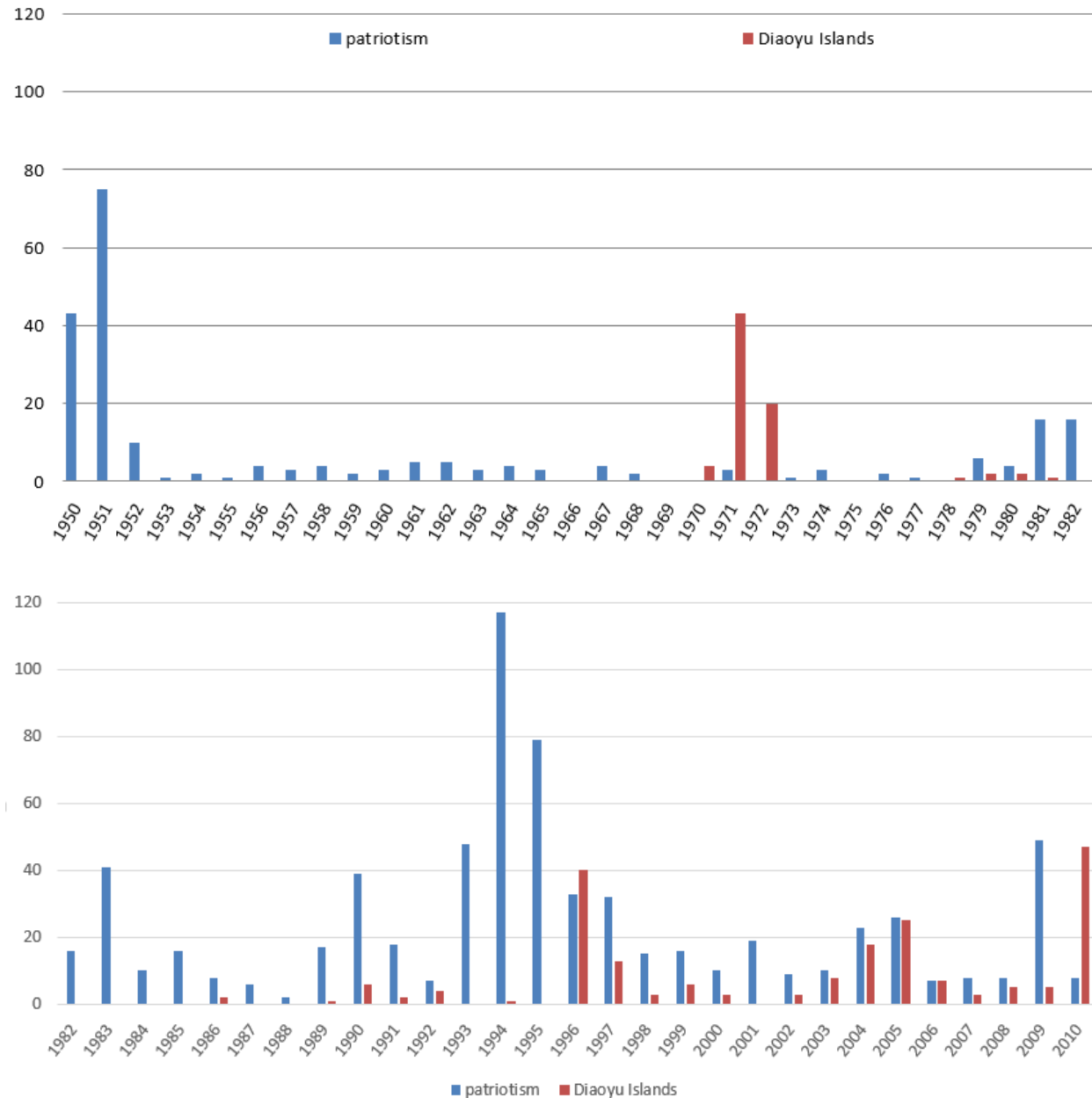
⁵ Edward N. Luttwak, *The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 8.

⁶ Edward Wong, “China Announces 12.2% Increase in Military Budget,” *New York Times*, March 5, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/06/world/asia/china-military-budget.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss&_r=1.

⁷ It is well known that the Chinese government understood that the Senkaku Islands were part of the Ryukyu (or Okinawan) island chain, as demonstrated by *People’s Daily*’s reports, declassified Chinese diplomatic archives, and official maps before 1970. “Liuqiu qundao renmin fandui Meiguo zhanling de douzheng” [Ryukyu People’s Struggle against U.S. Occupation], *People’s Daily*, January 8, 1953. “Tainichiwayaku niokeru ryodobubun no shucho nikansuru yoko soan” [Draft of Guidelines on Issues and Claims of Territories in Peace Treaty with Japan], *Jiji Press*, December 27, 2012. “Chugoku chizu ni ‘Chogyotou’ mikisai: 71 nen izen, Senkaku jikokuryo to minasazu, kokkyosen mo henko” [No Diaoyu Islands on Chinese Maps before 1971: China Sees Them as Foreign Territories and Border Line on the Map Changes after 1971], *Jiji Press*, December 29, 2013.

suggests that the state-led invocation of patriotism began in the 1980s, during which the legitimacy of socialism had begun to erode. This trend became more visible in the wake of the Tiananmen Square incident that took place in June 1989.⁸ Following the late 1990s, the frequency of “patriotism” and the “Diaoyu Islands” use has been a covariate.

Figure 1. Frequency of the Words “Patriotism (*aiguozhuyi*)” and the “Diaoyu Islands (*Diaoyudao*)” in the *People’s Daily*



Source: Headline search of “*aiguozhuyi*” and whole text search of “*Diaoyudao*” from 1950 to 2010, in DVDs of *People’s Daily*.

⁸ Keiji Kinoshita, “Aikokushugi Kyoiku” [Patriotic Education], in *Kiro ni Tatsu Nittyukankei*, kaiteiban [Sino-Japanese Relations at the Cross-Roads, rev. ed.], ed. Ryoko Iechida et al. (Kyoto: Koyo Shobo, 2013).

Figure 2 captures the concomitant behavior change, especially after 2008, in terms of the frequency of Chinese incursions into the territorial waters of the Senkaku Islands, as well as the frequency of Chinese naval vessels crossing the Ryukyu Islands. Previously, the Chinese government's activities in the East China Sea were guided by a more moderate rationale. This rationale was straightforward: If China attempted to change the status quo, it would have to confront not only Japan but also the United States. Thus, challenges to the status quo were highly likely to increase Sino-U.S. enmity, and therefore be detrimental.

However, this modest approach disappeared in 2008, especially after the conclusion of the Beijing Olympic Games. The Chinese navy undertook a number of fleet exercises that crossed into the western Pacific from the East China Sea via waterways along the Ryukyu Islands. The frequency of such exercises grew annually, suggesting they were part of a broader, purposeful strategy. There were only 2 such passages in 2008; by 2013, they had increased sevenfold to 14. These exercises took place in international waters without any violation of international law. They nonetheless triggered concern due to several incidents in which Chinese ship-borne helicopters flew near the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force destroyers that were monitoring the vessels.⁹ These risky actions could have caused an accident.

The Chinese government has engaged in similar provocative moves with regard to the Senkaku Islands. Beginning in 2008, its ships have encroached on the territorial waters around the Senkakus. The frequency of such incursions gradually rose thereafter, spiking noticeably following the Japanese government's purchase of three of the islands in September 2012. Fifty-two incursions occurred in 2013. This trend indicates that encroachment on the islands' territorial waters also reflects a broader, preplanned initiative.¹⁰ In effect, China is challenging Japan's ownership and control of the islands through physical means, as shown in Figure 2.

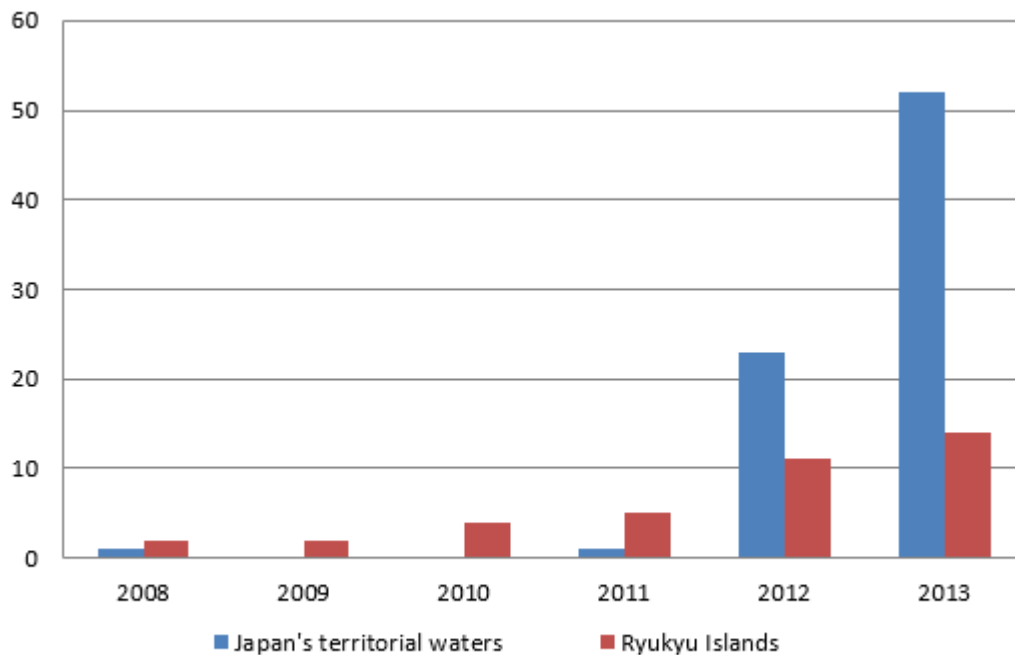
China's maritime expansion is not only about the East China Sea. One U.S. naval intelligence officer noted the nature of Chinese goals and actions in a 2013 public forum on maritime security in the following ways:

- “[China’s] expansion into the blue waters is largely about countering the U.S. Pacific fleet.”
- “The PLA Navy is going to sea to learn how to do naval warfare. . . . Make no mistake: the PRC navy is focused on war at sea, and sinking an opposing fleet.”
- “If you map out [the] harassments [by the China Marine Surveillance] you will see that they form a curved front that has over time expanded out against the coast of China’s neighbours, becoming the infamous nine-dashed line, plus the entire East China Sea. . . .

⁹ Ministry of Defense, *Defense of Japan 2010*, 61, http://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/pdf/2010/11Part1_Chapter2_Sec3.pdf.

¹⁰ Bonnie S. Glaser, “People’s Republic of China Maritime Disputes,” statement before the U.S. House Armed Services Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces and the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Asia Pacific, January 14, 2014, 4, http://csis.org/files/attachments/ts140114_glaser.pdf.

Figure 2. Frequency of Chinese Incursions into the Territorial Waters of the Senkaku Islands, as well as the Frequency of Chinese Naval Vessels Crossing the Ryukyu Islands, 2008–2013¹¹



China is negotiating for control of other nations' resources off their coasts; what's mine is mine, and we'll negotiate what's yours.”

- “China Marine Surveillance cutters have no other mission but to harass other nations into submitting to China's expansive claims. . . . China Marine Surveillance is a full-time maritime sovereignty harassment organisation.”

This transformation started in 2008.¹² Apart from the 2008 consensus agreement with Japan for developing resources in the East China Sea, Beijing has not compromised in any outstanding territorial or maritime sovereignty dispute since it resolved its dispute with Russia in 2004.¹³

According to the “rising trend” hypothesis, the incumbent Xi Jinping administration is continuing along this path that began under Hu Jintao in 2008 or 2009. This hypothesis holds that China passed a point of no return in 2009. The hypothesis predicts that the number of incursions will continue to increase. A China with greater economic security and more military power will cease to make compromises and will shed self-imposed behavioral constraints. Given that the underlying conditions for China’s assertiveness—its economic and military capacity—are well established, this hypothesis implies that this rising trend will continue, at least in the foreseeable future.

¹¹ Data from *Defense of Japan (from 2008 to 2013)*, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, *Asahi Shimbun*, *Sankei Shimbun*, *Kyodo News* and *Jiji Press*. “Chugoku Kosento niyoru Senkaku Syoto Shuhen no Setuzokusuiiki nai nyuiki oyobi Ryokai Shinnyu Sekisu (Tsukibetsu)” [Monthly Statistics of Entry of Contiguous Zones and Violation of Territorial Waters of Senkaku Islands by Chinese Government Ships], *Japan Coast Guard*, <http://www.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/senkaku/index.html>.

¹² “Blunt Words on China from US Navy,” *Lowy Institute Interpreter*, February 5, 2013, <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2013/02/05/Blunt-words-on-China-from-US-Navy.aspx>.

¹³ Swaine and Fravel, “China’s Assertive Behavior, Part Two,” 14.

“Cycle of Deterioration and Amelioration” Hypothesis

The “cycle” hypothesis focuses heavily on the impact of two domestic factors on China’s external behavior: the economy and varying approaches to foreign relations by different Chinese leaders. It also presupposes that deterioration of China’s external relations is often triggered by the perceived misbehavior of other nations, and that China’s negative “overreaction” further worsens the situation. The fact that the Chinese government places such high priority on economic growth compels it to constantly seek better relations with neighbors, which it would not do in the absence of such a rationale. This is one of the reasons that the “rising trend” thesis does not have as much explanatory power as it might appear.

The “cycle” hypothesis holds that 1982 was the critical turning point of Chinese foreign policy. With the launching of the diplomatic strategy of “independent foreign policy of peace” (*dulizizhu de hepingwaijiao*), China began to expend a great deal of effort to achieve amicable relations with its neighbors with economic goals under peaceful circumstances in mind.¹⁴ Even when frictions with partners resulted from disagreements over domestic problems in China, Beijing ensured, time and time again, that relations reverted to the status quo ante.

One instance that illustrates this mechanism is the Tiananmen Square incident. China’s relationship with the United States, Europe, and Japan soured after the Chinese government used force to suppress a democratization movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989. However, the Chinese government then worked for several years to mend its relations with these major powers. One concrete example of this attempt was the successful invitation of the Japanese Emperor Hirohito to Beijing in 1992. Japan was the first developed country in the western world to lift economic sanctions against China after the Tiananmen Massacre.

Intraparty differences and power struggles among senior-level members of the CPC also resulted in these alternating periods of “deterioration” and “amelioration.” Since the Chinese leadership cadre began to strategically cultivate patriotism among the population in the 1980s, the adverse impact of this “patriotism strategy” upon the Sino-Japanese relationship has concerned many individuals in the Chinese leadership. Yet there is great variation on how leaders handle this matter on a practical level.

For instance, leaders like Hu Yaobang always sought stable ties with Japan, as they perceived Japan to be a key player for China’s economic development.¹⁵ By contrast, Jiang Zemin remained highly critical of Japan and did not mind seeing the Sino-Japanese relationship fray.¹⁶ In turn, Hu Jintao, the successor to Jiang, successfully returned bilateral relations with Japan to a state of “normalcy.” He, like his faction leader and political mentor Hu Yaobang, understood the poison of nationalism

¹⁴ Tomoyuki Kojima, *Gendai Chugoku no Seiji: Sono Riron to Jissen* [Politics of Contemporary China: Theory and Practice] (Tokyo: Keio University Press, 1999), chapter 7.

¹⁵ Yoshikazu Shimizu, *Chugoku wa Naze “Han-Nichi” ni Nattaka* [Why Has China Become “Anti-Japanese”?] (Tokyo: Bungeishunju Ltd., 2003), 117–21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, chapter 7.

and believed that Japan was a critical player in the region.¹⁷ Xi Jinping, however, is following in the footsteps of Jiang Zemin on this issue: He places a lower priority on relations with Japan, rather favoring invocations of patriotism-based loyalty for the purpose of preserving political stability within China. On the whole, as factions gain or lose power in China, their rises and falls accentuate the alternating waves of “deterioration” and “amelioration” in China’s foreign relations with the world, including in its relationship with Japan.

Unfortunately for Japan, those leaders who believe Japan is important tended to lose the intraparty power struggles. For instance, when Hu Yaobang lost power in 1985, he was accused of maintaining a close relationship with the then-Japanese prime minister, Yasuhiro Nakasone.¹⁸ Moreover, some hypothesize that the anti-Japan protests that repeatedly took place under the reign of Hu Jintao may have been a calculated “backlash” against the pro-Japan faction orchestrated by Jiang Zemin.¹⁹ If this hypothesis holds true, it suggests that tensions between China and Japan over the Senkaku Islands in 2012 may have originated from the intraparty power game during the transition period of leadership from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping.

To be sure, the leadership aspect of the “cycle” hypothesis is not absolute. Jiang Zemin, for example, was not always critical of Japan; he did seek amelioration occasionally.²⁰ Similarly, Hu Jintao sometimes took a hardline stance vis-à-vis Japan. For example, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi’s annual visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, a location perceived as a symbol of militarism by the Chinese, meant that Hu Jintao could not maintain his pro-Japanese policies. Hu made a decision to ameliorate relations with Japan in 2006 simply because Koizumi left office and the new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe implied that he would not go to the shrine. In general, most leaders attempted to revert back to a state of normalcy in their relations with Japan when relations soured.

One of the most prominent illustrations of this phenomenon was the friction that occurred in China-Japan relations after 2010. Tensions began in September 2010 when a Chinese fishing boat collided with a Japan Coast Guard patrol boat within the territorial waters of the Senkaku Islands. China’s attitude stiffened upon learning that the captain of the Chinese fishing boat had been arrested and detained by Japanese authorities. Subsequently, the Chinese government took a combative approach by detaining four Japanese nationals living in China who had no connections with the incident and by imposing a ban on exports of rare earth elements to Japan.²¹ Subsequently, China had to change course after its actions triggered a backlash from the international community. Dai Bingguo, a state councilor, published a paper that stressed China’s

¹⁷ Ibid., chapter 8.

¹⁸ Yasuhiro Nakasone, *Tenchi Yujo: Sengo Seiji Gojunen wo Kataru* [Mercy in the Heaven and on Earth: Straight Talk on Fifty-Year Post-War Politics in Japan] (Tokyo: Bungei Shunju Press, 1996), 461–65; Allen S. Whiting, *China Eyes Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 237–40.

¹⁹ Tomoyuki Kojima, *Kukki Suru Chugoku: Nihon wa do Chugoku to Mukiaunoka?* [Rise of China: How Should Japan Deal with China?] (Tokyo: Ashi Shobo, 2005), 32–37.

²⁰ Shimizu, *Chugoku wa Naze “Han-Nichi” ni Nattaka*, chapter 2.

²¹ Denny Roy, *Return of the Dragon: Rising China and Regional Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 93–95.

intention to maintain “peaceful development,”²² and China began to promote a state-directed attempt to improve ties with Japan.

Another example of the cycle of deterioration and amelioration took place after September 2012, when the Japanese government purchased three of the Senkaku Islands. Although China released press comments that were highly critical of Japan, it subsequently sought to mend relations. According to the “cycle” hypothesis, this reversal in China’s attitude can be attributed to the subsiding of the intraparty power struggle that occurred between the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of November 2012 and the National People’s Congress of March 2013, during which a succession struggle for membership in the new Central Politburo (and its standing committee) and the State Council took place. The Chinese government first made a proposal to ameliorate its relations with Japanese officials in March 2013, leading to numerous international exchanges between September and October.²³ These efforts did not culminate in a summit, however. Table 1 shows how these events fit into a “cycle of deterioration and amelioration.”

Table 1. Examples of China’s Provocation and Attempt to Amend Ties with Japan from September 2012 to November 2013²⁴

Period	Provocations	Attempts to amend relations
Sep. 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Violent anti-Japanese demonstrations 	
Dec. 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Violation of airspace of Senkaku Islands 	
Feb. 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fire control radar lock-on Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) helicopter and vessel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Xi Jinping’s meeting with chief representative of ruling New Komeito, Natsuo Yamaguchi
Mar. 2013		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proposal to improve relations with Japanese officials
May 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chinese submarine spotted in waters off of Okinawa 	
Aug. 2013		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction of tensions around the Senkaku Islands
Sep. 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First UAV (drone) flight over the East China Sea 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Xi Jinping and Shinzo Abe meet and shake hands at the G-20 meeting CITIC delegation visits Japan
Oct. 2013		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China sends a secret envoy to Japan 35th anniversary ceremony of the Sino-Japanese Peace and Friendship Treaty Xi Jinping makes an accommodative speech on diplomacy toward neighboring nations
Nov. 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Announcement of Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) 	

Source: Author’s compilation of reports by *Asahi Shimbun*, *Nikkei Shimbun*, *Sankei Shimbun*, and *Jiji Press*.

²² Dai Bingguo, “Jianchi Zou Heping Fazhan Daolu” [We Firmly Take a Route of Peaceful Development], Ecns.cn, December 7, 2010, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2010/12-07/2704984.shtml>.

²³ “Senkaku, Yuzurenu Ichinen: Dakyoan, Shushogawa ga Isshu” [One Year of No Compromise on Senkaku: PM Abe Rejects China’s Proposal of Compromise], *Asahi Shimbun*, September 11, 2013; “Shu Shuseki, Tai-Nichi Kaizen wo Mosaku, Juyo Kaigi de ‘Keizai Koryu’ Shiji, Tairitsu Jotai Furieki, Chugoku” [President Xi Tries to Seek Amelioration of Relations with Japan: ‘Economic Exchanges’ Were Directed since Rivalry Is Not Beneficial to China], *Jiji Press*, November 15, 2013, <http://www.jiji.com/jc/zc?k=201311/2013111500739&g=pol>.

²⁴ The nationality of submarines detected in contiguous zones of the Ryukyu Islands is not formally confirmed by Japanese officials.

In short, the “cycle” hypothesis holds that China’s current behavior is just a continuation of its omnidirectional foreign policy to achieve continuous economic growth and maintain domestic stability. It suggests that the Chinese government *wants* to revert back to normalcy in its relations with Japan even when frictions occur. An implication is that neighbors can expect such behavior from China in the future. This is because fraying ties with countries like Japan and the Philippines can ultimately result in a strategic confrontation with their most important ally, the United States. As long as China places its economic development and political stability as its highest priorities, China will continue to make efforts to ameliorate relations with neighbors. The hypothesis shows that there are limits to China’s hardline approach.

“Redefinition of Strategic Rivals” Hypothesis

The third hypothesis is “redefinition of strategic rivals.” Some of China’s strategic goals or discourse to describe China’s stance on external issues are quite distant from current realities. For example, China insists that China is not divided and that Taiwan is a part of China, and that most of the East and South China Seas are under China’s sovereignty. China has confronted its neighbors and strategic rivals in order to narrow the gap between its goals and reality.

This hypothesis supposes that China is always in conflict with some of its neighbors and at least one strategic rival because of the balance this strikes in its strategic relations. For instance, before the Sino-Soviet split, China’s major strategic rival was the United States. Thereafter, however, the United States and China moved more closely together as a bulwark to Soviet power. Such maneuvering can be seen in China’s relations today. Thus, the behavioral patterns of Chinese diplomacy have not fundamentally changed; what has changed since the 1950s is which country China confronts and intensity of that confrontation.

Table 2 makes clear that the People’s Republic of China and the Communist Party of China have never achieved friendly relationships with all their neighbors or other strategically significant countries. For example, following the Communist Party’s victory in the Chinese Civil War, it kept confronting the Kuomintang in Taiwan militarily; there has yet to be an end to the confrontation in the Taiwan Strait.

Taiwan and the United States have played the role of major Chinese “rivals” since the Korean War (for relations with the United States, the period of Sino-Soviet enmity is an exception). For the Chinese government, the image of the United States has shifted from direct to indirect rival since normalization. This gave China the impetus to redefine constantly its relations with the United States by bringing up new strategic concepts like “strategic partnership” and a “new type of major-power relationship.”

Table 2. Direct and Indirect Rivals of the People’s Republic of China/Communist Party of China

Content	Period	Direct rivals	Indirect rivals
Civil War through Sino-U.S. normalization	1946–1972/1978	Kuomintang/Taiwan	U.S.
Korean War through Sino-U.S. normalization	1950–1972/1978	U.S., Republic of Korea	
Indo-China conflict (including Vietnam War and civil war in Cambodia)	1950–1991		France, U.S., USSR
Sino-Soviet confrontation	1960–1989	USSR, Mongolia	
Sino-Indian border conflict	1962	India	USSR
Sino-Vietnamese war	1979	Vietnam	USSR
Third Taiwan Strait crisis through Chen Shui-bian	1995–2008	Taiwan	U.S.
China’s assertive engagement with South China Sea	1974–present	Vietnam, Philippines	U.S.
China’s assertive engagement with Senkaku Islands	2008–present	Japan	U.S.

Source: Author’s compilation.

If the underlying assumptions of the “redefinition” hypothesis are correct, it is possible to make the following inferences. As compared to the 1950s, China is expected to be more conciliatory in its diplomacy. A quick review of diplomatic history is of use here. In the 1950s, China fought the United States in the Korean War. Thereafter, it had a confrontational relationship with Taiwan for a long period of time. China had also fought India, Vietnam, and the Soviet Union. The Chinese government shifted gears dramatically in the 1980s, when its diplomatic approach was not based on a (hypothetical) “major enemy” and it gave top priority to economic development. China actively *avoided* creating enmity or a potential for military confrontation with other countries. The fact that since 1979 the Chinese government adopted a peaceful unification policy and therefore did not order the PLA to attack Taiwan supports this contention. More recently, during frictions over the Senkaku Islands with Japan, China was careful not to provoke military engagement. In short, there is a clear trend of declining behavioral hawkishness, which is incompatible with the “rising trend” hypothesis from the long-term perspective.

Other examples are also illustrative. For one, when Sino-Soviet ties were at their nadir, China hedged by eagerly improving relations with the United States. Thereafter, when the Sino-Soviet split subsided, there was less of a threat to China from overland aggression. This led China to be confrontational toward Taiwan and its ultimate guarantor, the United States. Another example occurred in 2008, during the executive transition from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to the Kuomintang (KMT). As a result, the Chinese and Taiwanese governments drew closer quickly, which gave China the “strategic space” to adopt a more hawkish attitude toward politics over the South China Sea and the East China Sea. In truth, China grew more hostile to Japan and the Philippines. In short, if the “redefinition” hypothesis is correct, it predicts that China selectively confronts rivals to secure its interests while avoiding being strategically surrounded by hostile neighbors and major powers at the same time.

Moreover, the “redefinition” thesis also predicts that confrontation depends not only on China’s own strategic choices but also on its neighbors’ diplomatic troubles. This is because Chinese strategic interests range from territorial ambitions to rivalries over rights at sea. Put differently, history has shown that China is a “patient” actor. Its hawkishness occurs immediately after some potential adversary commits a diplomatic mistake. Well-prepared hawks stay in the leading position in the decisionmaking, fully utilizing the mistake and asserting their strategic rivals. As mentioned earlier, the International Crisis Group contends that China’s actions reflect a “reactively assertive” tactic, often used in the South China Sea, whereby it exploits perceived provocations by other countries in disputed areas to change the status quo in its favor.²⁵

The “redefinition” hypothesis predicts that China may grow more conciliatory toward Japan and the Philippines if a hostile leader comes to power in neighbors like India, Taiwan, or the United States. In addition, when Japan and the Philippines have pro-China leaders, China might make minimal compromises for amelioration of tensions.

Finally, despite changes for the better in specific bilateral alliances, this hypothesis predicts that assertive Chinese will continue and always be present in certain issues in the future as long as its strategic ambitions are not completely satisfied.

Policy Implications

The three hypotheses explained above offer distinct policy implications for China’s neighbors and for the United States.

The first policy implication draws on the “rising trend” hypothesis. If this hypothesis is correct, a strategy of hedging will be desirable for China’s neighbors and the United States. Hedging requires these neighbors to be more cooperative with each other to face Chinese power. China will inevitably have tensions with neighbors such as Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam, whose geographical location “blocks” the expansion of Chinese strategic influence. These neighbors, on the other hand, will resist China’s simultaneous expansion of economic and military power, and concomitant assertive foreign policy behavior, as Edward Luttwak argues.²⁶

In this scenario, friction does not necessarily emanate from deteriorating relations between China and another neighbor but from the dynamics of the period of power transition. In other words, friction is a symptom rather than a cause. China’s neighbors will have to turn to the United States as the regional but geographically remote balancer to minimize friction. At the same time, as a regional great power Japan will be expected to take a greater role in this transition period. One example is that the Philippines seeks greater cooperation not only with the United States but also with Japan.²⁷

As for the United States, its options are limited to accepting the call for greater engagement in East

²⁵ International Crisis Group, “Dangerous Waters,” 12–15.

²⁶ Luttwak, *The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy*, chapter 11.

²⁷ “Kaijo Keibi Kyoka de Junshitei 10 Seki wo Kyoyo: Nichi-Hi Shunokaidan” [Japan Supplies 10 Patrol Boats to the Philippines for Enhancing Maritime Security: Japan-Philippine Summit Meeting], *Nikkei Shimbun*, July 27, 2013.

Asia. The reasoning is straightforward: For China, the United States is a “strategic competitor” and China seeks to dominate the United States’ allies and security partners. Greater engagement, however, may invite hedging against the United States by China, which is likely to result in a vicious cycle in East Asia. To minimize this possibility, China’s neighbors have an incentive both to seek greater cooperation with the United States and to strengthen engagement with China.

The second policy implication rests on the “cycle of deterioration and amelioration” hypothesis. If this hypothesis is correct, neighboring governments will prioritize strengthening engagement diplomacy vis-à-vis China in recognition that overall China’s development is built on a peaceful and stable strategic environment. Moreover, this hypothesis implies that China *will* ameliorate its relations with its neighbors after relations sour. Put differently, it is reasonable for other nations to expect that doves will eventually return to leading positions in decisionmaking even when hawks appear to be predominant in setting China’s strategic course; previously this has occurred in economic relations.

In this scenario, China’s neighbors like Japan and the Philippines have an opportunity to improve ties with China. They may adopt a strategy of patience and seek to keep engaging China until doves return to leading positions in China. They have to avoid “provocative” words and actions in order to maintain good political atmosphere with China. However, it is important to bear in mind that once China’s relationship with another country becomes tense, it puts strong political and psychological pressures on it by preserving its position and even by resorting to coercive means. China also engages in negative campaigns to undermine the diplomatic image of its adversary. Such tactics will strengthen the influence of the conservatives and hawks in the target nation, making it more difficult to reach a compromise. For the target nation to minimize this possibility and improve relations with China (even reluctantly through compromise), it will be critical to keep hawks marginalized in the domestic political debate.

In addition, the governments of China’s neighbors now in conflict with China should examine why other states succeeded in improving relations with China. For instance, Russia has reached a strategic partnership agreement with China, which provides arms sought by China. The two countries are unlikely to revert to a frictional relationship because they have addressed territorial disputes through negotiation. Another example is Taiwan, which has also improved its ties with mainland China. Since 2008, the Taiwanese authorities have offered a “compromise” deal by officially invoking the “1992 consensus” that included “one China.” Countries like Japan and the Philippines could study these cases to see if relevant diplomatic lessons can be applied to their ties with China.

The third and final policy implication builds on the “redefinition of strategic rivals” hypothesis. If this hypothesis is correct, China’s neighboring governments should ensure constantly that they avoid being targeted by China’s enmity. It is critical to note that any neighbor can be a “rival” of China. This hypothesis also suggests that when China ends friction with one country, it directs enmity to another. At the same time, this hypothesis suggests that the United States should

reevaluate its alliance strategy and take a more regional approach by not reacting separately to each event involving a specific ally or security partner.

Today's Sino-Japanese frictions may capture this dynamic. The Chinese government is putting pressure on Japanese Prime Minister Abe, which used to be directed at former Taiwanese leaders such as Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian. At the same time, China sought to win cooperation from the United States by framing the Taiwanese leadership as the trouble maker.²⁸ This label has been transferred to Japan. In this way, China seeks to drive wedges between the United States and its allies because it understands American reluctance to be involved in frictions with China through its allies' and security partners' "trivial matters."

In this scenario, it is Asian nations that are more likely than China to be compelled to make compromises when diplomatic friction between those countries and China escalates. This is because the United States always finds it easier to ask its friends and allies to be more conciliatory than to ask China. At the same time, however, no sovereign state wants to compromise its territory or political independence. This leads to a diplomatic impasse and also invites dissatisfaction or criticism from the United States. Pressure from China targets precisely this point.

As a consequence, the third hypothesis suggests that the countries and governments that are targeted by China must escape this vicious cycle. This is not impossible, as the case of Taiwan demonstrates. Thus, if Japan offers "empty compromises" to China over the sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands through carefully designed diplomatic wording, it can improve its relations with China, albeit temporarily. Yet it remains to be seen if this would lead Japan out of the vicious cycle and into a virtuous cycle. Moreover, such a move would have spillover effects on other Asian nations like the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam if a regional great power such as Japan has to submit to China on critical issues such as a territorial sovereignty under paramilitary pressure. In this case, the strategic power balance in East Asia will tilt—perhaps irrevocably—toward China. Another implication of this dynamic is that countries with poor relations with China should engage other regional powers. This is because, as explained previously, China's redefinition of its strategic rivals accounts for the status of its relations with states other than that rival, including possible "swing states" such as the Republic of Korea (ROK) or countries like Cambodia in Southeast Asia. China's maintenance of healthy ties is driven partially by its need to focus its energies on dealing with strategic rivals such as the United States and Japan. If the latter nations can improve their relationships with the ROK and some Southeast Asian countries, this will compel China to adjust its policies both because it will have to increase its efforts in those neighbors to maintain influence and because better ties with targeted nations may cause swing states to be less supportive of China's position towards targeted nations.

²⁸ Yasuhiro Matsuda, "Taiwan's Partisan Politics and Its Impact on U.S.-Taiwanese Relations," *Journal of Social Science* 63, no. 3/4 (December 2011): 73–94, http://jwww.iss.u-tokyo.ac.jp/jss/pdf/jss630304_073094.pdf.

Conclusion: Challenges to China's Neighbors and the United States

The three hypotheses examined in this paper each have their own merits, despite the shortcomings in explanatory power mentioned previously. Each captures some dimension of “truth” in Asia’s strategic relations. It can even be assumed that each hypothesis *is* accurate, or that the three of them are correlated, if one believes in the spiral-like evolution of history. If so, one can make the following prediction: that China’s hawkish assertiveness will escalate as its national power expands and that China will direct enmity to a specific country or group to isolate it or them. But once the strategic situation is seen as turning or in actuality turns against it, China will seek some solution by attempting to improve relations with the target nation at the most propitious moment. This brings all three hypotheses into play when explaining China’s relations.

Most of the nations that have experienced diplomatic conflicts or impasses with China following the end of the Cold War are allies or security partners of the United States. Their political status in Asia reflects the regional order constructed by the United States after World War II and during the Cold War. Today, this balance is in flux as power tilts toward China. Regardless of the predictive power of the three hypotheses, the United States might at times view its allies and security partners as “trouble makers”—no matter how hard these governments work to keep close ties with the United States—because they risk bringing the United States into conflict with China, so long as China avoids direct confrontation with the United States.

As William Blake once said, “It is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend.” This quote is ever more meaningful in contemporary strategic conditions in East Asia, because expectations for strategic friends and those for strategic adversaries are completely different. Humans expect more from friends than from rivals: they expect friends to fully support them. They do not expect much from rivals—absence of friction is enough. Close friends and family members clash with each other precisely because expectations of support are high. People might lose friends as a result. When this happens, how will the rival react? Will it become friendly or even more hostile?

Looking toward the future, it is important to consider that the spiral of Chinese relations with other nations may look different when China has more power. Maybe the cycles will be smaller, or China will have more sticks and fewer carrots, or bigger sticks and bigger carrots. Or that the calculation of strategic rivalry will be different because correlation of other forces won’t scare China as much. Ultimately, if China’s GDP surpasses that of the United States and all the Chinese neighbors submit to it, will the United States be defined as a direct rival or will China’s strategic rivalries finally end?

China’s diplomatic inflexibility and determined behavior pose major challenges not just to its neighbors but also to the United States. The United States should have a grand strategy to address this challenge. Thus far, the U.S. “rebalance” to Asia is more like a slogan than a concrete strategic plan. U.S. policies toward friends and allies surrounding China should be components of the larger strategy, not an accumulation of sporadic reactions. U.S. allies and security partners also should

integrate themselves into this strategy through frequent strategic dialogues and consultations with the United States.

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