

The China-Japan Relationship: An American Perspective

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“Is China a threat for the United States?” I am often asked this question after people learn that I am a political scientist with an expertise in China. “Why is Japan important for the United States?” When they find that I am a Japanese scholar, also studying Japanese politics, this is frequently the next question asked. I have answered these questions as a China specialist coming from Japan while in the United States for 19 years. In this article, I discuss the China-Japan relationship from an American perspective, by considering both the security and economic aspects of the China-Japan-U.S. triangular relationship. Peter Gries, political scientist and director of the Institute for U.S.–China Issues at the University of Oklahoma, argues: “the primary U.S. role in Sino-Japanese relations should be to maintain and improve U.S.-China and U.S.-Japan relations to serve as a bedrock upon which China and Japan can work on resolving their differences.”¹ Concurring with this argument, I suggest how the United States could and should positively contribute to the China-Japan relationship by improving and strengthening its bilateral relationships with China and Japan.

China in the U.S.-Japan Relationship

During the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō to the United States in April 2015, interestingly, the “main actor” was China. The discussions regarding the U.S.-Japan relationship often shifted to discussing China in the second sentence. In his speech to the U.S. Congress, Abe called the U.S.-Japan alliance an “alliance of hope” and focused on strengthening Japan’s security and economic relationship with the United States, without mentioning “China” at all. Moreover, the Guidelines for Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation (hereafter “the new

¹ Peter Hays Gries, “Sino-Japanese Relations: The American Factor,” in Niklas Sanström and Ryosei Kokubun, eds., *Sino-Japanese Relations: Rivals or Partners in Regional Cooperation?* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2013), 72.

defense guidelines”), announced on April 27 just before Abe’s visit to Washington D.C., did not mention “China,” either. However, it is evident that both Abe’s speech and the new defense guidelines had the rise of China in mind.

When I asked Thomas Schieffer, former U.S. ambassador to Japan and Australia, why Japan is important for the United States, he answered: “Japan is important for the United States to manage China, and hence the increasing importance of China has made Japan even more important, not less important.”² Some Japanese may think that this statement undervalues Japan’s importance, but I disagree. Instead, I argue that this statement suggests how much the United States makes of Japan’s importance. We should all note that the most important bilateral relationship in international politics is not the U.S.-Japan relationship but the U.S.-China relationship. However, Japan is the most important treaty-based ally of the United States. Schieffer’s statement made a point of the fact that the United States would like to manage its most important bilateral relationship together with Japan, which demonstrates how important Japan is for the United States.

In the 1990s immediately after the end of the Cold War, the United States was confident in its ability to solve many, if not all, of the problems in the world. However, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the Iraq War that began in 2003 made the United States realize that it could not manage every problem in the world but would need to prioritize the problems. The “pivot to Asia” is a popular topic in policy discussions of American foreign policy—the “pivot” in other words means the “priority”—and the pivot to Asia above all means that the United States gives priority to Asia over any other region such as the Middle East or Russia. According to Bonnie Glaser, Freeman Chair in China Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the

² Author’s interview with Thomas Schieffer, Dallas, TX, April 22, 2014.

pivot to Asia gives U.S. allies in the Asia-Pacific region the “reassurance” of the U.S. commitment to regional security.³ Therefore, the overall message that the United States has been sending to Japan is that it wants to manage the most important issue in its foreign policy together with Japan, which strongly suggests the importance of Japan for the United States.

How Should the United States Manage China?

Many American scholars agree that the background of the pivot to Asia is the dynamic economic development of the Asia-Pacific region and the rise of China in both security and the economy.⁴ For example, Glaser argues that the pivot to Asia has an active aim of benefiting from Asia’s growing economy and a passive aim of responding to the requests for security assurance from the U.S. allies that have felt the threat from China’s military expansion.⁵ Moreover, Thomas Fingar, political scientist and former chairman of the National Intelligence Council, suggests that the primary goal of the pivot to Asia is incorporating China into the U.S.-led international order. It would also help the United States to maintain supremacy in post–Cold War international politics.⁶

However, Patrick Walsh, former commander of the U.S. Navy Pacific Fleet, insists that China’s goal is building a Chinese-led international order and hence China will reject being incorporated into the U.S.-led international order, stating: “China does not have the intention to follow the existing international-law-based agreements that have been functioning. Instead

³ Presentation at the SMU Tower Center National Security Conference 2014: “The United States and China: Strategy, Competition and Innovation,” Dallas, TX, November 6, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_We6T7qLuH4&index=3&list=UUGvJwwa6JpfEDg0FHS HzsHA.

⁴ For example, Hilary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy* 189 (November 2011): 56–63.

⁵ See fn. 3.

⁶ Author’s interview with Thomas Fingar, Dallas, TX, November 5, 2014.

China tries to reject the U.S.-established rules and international order.”⁷ For example, in the South China Sea, exclusive economic zones (EEZs) originally existed based on the lines agreed upon by the surrounding nations. However, China has recently challenged them and declared the whole South China Sea as China’s territorial waters. When Walsh raised the legitimacy of this declaration with the Chinese participant at a conference, the Chinese participant brushed it aside saying: “Because we claim it.” From China’s standpoint, the existing EEZs in the South China Sea were determined without China’s participation when China was not powerful enough to participate in such a decision, and hence China should redraw the lines now that it has sufficient power to push its own demands. According to Walsh, how to manage the China that does not follow the rules is the most important strategic challenge for the United States and its allies.

In the meantime, perhaps China is currently trying to build a Chinese-led international order by establishing several international institutions, such as the New Development Bank (formerly referred to as the BRICS Development Bank), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the “One Belt, One Road” initiative (also called the new Silk Road initiative). Elizabeth Economy, political scientist and director for Asia studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, argues that President Xi Jinping gives the highest priority to tightening his grip over anything.⁸ In the domestic sphere, he tightens his grip on the control of political power and social stability by cracking down on dissidents and curbing corruption. Meanwhile, in the international sphere, he tightens his grip on control of the international order by projecting China’s power in whatever way it can. According to Economy, China projects its power by establishing the AIIB, expands its sphere of influence in Central Asia and more broadly in

⁷ Author’s interview with Patrick Walsh, Dallas, TX, May 5, 2014.

⁸ Elizabeth C. Economy, “China’s Imperial President: Xi Jinping Tightens His Grip,” *Foreign Affairs* 93(6) (November/December 2014): 80–91.

Eurasia by leading the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and tries to build a Chinese-led security system by undermining U.S. influence in the Asia-Pacific region. In short, Xi seems to be trying to apply the method of maintaining one-party rule in the domestic sphere to manage China's influence in the international sphere. Xi's pompous slogans, such as the "China dream" (*Zhongguo meng*) and the "great restoration of the Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing*) might help Xi tighten his grip in domestic politics, but they make other nations doubt China's intention to use its power as a responsible stakeholder in international politics.

Is China a Threat for the United States?

While we often talk about whether China is a threat for the United States, who is the biggest threat for China? Is it the United States? Japan? Russia? I would say that the biggest threat for China is China itself. The Xi Jinping administration has found the dissatisfaction of its own people with the state and society to be the biggest threat for the regime, rather than the militarily powerful United States, the Japan with which China has historical frictions and conflicts, or the Russia with which China shares long borders. I conducted field research in China for the book I published last year on the political economy of rural China.⁹ The field research made me aware of how China's leaders are concerned that people's dissatisfaction with the state and society may become a source of political instability. Moreover, since 2011 the Chinese government has spent more on police than on national defense. Police are for internal threats while national defense is for external threats. Popular protests have sometimes escalated

⁹ Hiroki Takeuchi, *Tax Reform in Rural China: Revenue, Resistance and Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

into attacks on a local government buildings or property.¹⁰ In the meantime, no government building has been attacked by foreign troops since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. One can understand the reality that the biggest threat for China is China.

The basis of the “China threat” argument is the image of the aggregate China whose GDP is the second largest in the world. However, for China, with a population of 1.3 billion, the second largest economy does not mean the second richest nation in the world. As Thomas Christensen, political scientist and professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University, points out, the challenge facing the world is that the influential China, which is expected to be a responsible stakeholder as the world's second largest economy, is still a developing country.¹¹ China's authoritarian regime has to wrestle with institution building to solve the problems of a developing country, such as poverty and inequality, to name a few. Moreover, under one-party rule, people's dissatisfaction is borne by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as there is no other political organization to blame. It is difficult for the CCP to respond to the dissatisfaction with corruption, inequality, inflation, and other problems directly related to people's daily lives by providing sweeping solutions to these problems. Moreover, it is evident that mobilizing nationalism to divert people's dissatisfaction is not sustainable.¹²

In short, the China that has to be primarily concerned with domestic stability has found it difficult to behave as a responsible stakeholder. Having interviewed the officials in charge of

¹⁰ See: Xi Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹¹ Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015).

¹² For the debates on the regime's use of nationalism in China's foreign policy, see: Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

foreign policy making in the Chinese government, two U.S. experts on Chinese foreign policy, Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, argue that while the Chinese government is strongly concerned with the issues directly related to its security such as the relationships with Taiwan, North Korea, Japan, and the United States, it is not much concerned with the problems in the Middle East or Africa.¹³ Of course, China makes a point of the relationships with the African oil-producing countries, such as Angola and Sudan, because the stable supply of natural resources is crucial to maintain economic growth—and directly related to national interests. However, it has little intention to provide international public goods by contributing to the stability of these regions. The Chinese government has to go all out to maintain domestic stability; there is no room to care about the issues not directly related to its security. In other words, China may not be a responsible stakeholder but a threat in international relations, not because China is too powerful but because it is not powerful enough.

What Should Japan Do?

How should Japan and the United States manage the “not powerful enough” China to be a responsible stakeholder? Primarily concerned with domestic instability, China does not have the capability or the intention to provide security and stability in the Asia-Pacific region even if it tries to expand its sphere of influence to replace the current U.S. status. Although China is rising, security and stability in the region will not be provided unless the United States keeps its commitment to providing them. Fingar argue: “The pivot to Asia is the basis of the U.S. grand strategy, and the engagement with China is inevitable to pivot Asia. The pivot to Asia must be backed by capability, which should be provided by U.S. presence in Asia and economic treaties

¹³ Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).”¹⁴ The U.S. engagement policy toward China is based on the trinity of liberalism in international relations theory: economic interdependence, international rule of law, and democracy. The idea is that engaging China into global economic interdependence should give China an incentive to follow the U.S.-led international order—and perhaps China may be democratized. This year is the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. Japan has enjoyed the prosperity based on this trinity of liberalism, which has also been the basis of the U.S.-Japan alliance. The Japanese should be confident in being a role model of the trinity of liberalism. The role that the United States expects Japan to contribute to strengthening the U.S.-led rule-based international order is to advance the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and to move forward international economic agreements such as the TPP, which would deepen the economic interdependence in the Asia-Pacific region and help to broaden the appeal of the value of democracy.

The early conclusion of the TPP is especially important, not just because of international rule making to support economic interdependence in the Asia-Pacific region but also for security reasons. By imposing pressure on China by creating a yes-or-no choice to the new set of internationally adopted rules, the United States and Japan could ascertain whether China has the intention to use its capability as a responsible stakeholder. If China shows its intention to follow these rules as a responsible player in international economy, the TPP with China as a member in the future will further deepen economic interdependence in the Asia-Pacific, from which China will also benefit economically. Meanwhile, if China does not show its intention to follow these rules, then it will be the best strategy for the United States and its allies to push the TPP as “our rules” and to confront China’s challenge to the U.S.-led international order. In either case, the

¹⁴ Author’s interview with Fingar.

early conclusion of the TPP will become the foundation of political and economic stability in the Asia-Pacific.