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Perception Gaps, Identity Clashes

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CLASH OF NATIONAL IDENTITIES:

China, Japan, and the East
China Sea Territorial Dispute

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Perception Gaps, Identity Clashes

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SUMMARY

The ongoing turmoil in East Asia highlight that differences historical memory between nations lead to divergent perceptions, persistent security dilemmas and ongoing disputes over territory. The understanding of the past without doubt impacts the present, as well as the future. Interpretation of history therefore must be seen as a cause for conflict. That understanding must be the starting point to preempt further tensions, and prevent conflict and establishing a sustainable relationship in this region, particularly between China and Japan.

- China and Japan have different perceptions about how the islands in the East China Sea have come to dispute. The history may be the same, but there are two different stories to be told. What causes those perception gaps that lead to mutual distrust? This essay not only identifies the sources of animosity, but also provides recommendations to break through that cycle of mistrust.
- Both sides would agree that a huge perception gap exists between China and Japan. Both view themselves as the victim and the other as the aggressor. Each party sees itself as peaceful, while the other state is aggressive.
- Both mistrust the other's intentions, and expect the other to be plotting against them. What it actually means is a clash of two very different interpretations of history and differences in identity. The clash is the result of two very different ways of teaching history.

- In order to improve bilateral relations, both Japan and China need to take some time to replay the events of tension and gain perspective on the causes of tension. Without knowing exactly what the other side's perspective is and reasoning behind the perspective, it is impossible to find a solution.
- Scholars of two countries from different disciplines should conduct regular conferences and meetings. These dialogues should aim to bring the suppressed differences of perception to the surface. The media of the two countries should report the scholars' findings to the general public.

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TENSIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND JAPAN are now at their highest level since 1972, when relations between the two countries were normalized. The dispute over a few, uninhabited small islands and rocks in the East China Sea is just one of the long list of grievances between the two Asian nations. What is worrisome is the hidden dangers resulting from the huge perception gaps of how one country sees the other. The other worry is a clash of identities between the two nations, and the different understandings of history and future objectives.

China and Japan both view themselves as the victim and the other as the aggressor. Each party sees itself as peaceful, while the other state is aggressive and revisionist. Both also have bubbled conspiracy theories against the other, placing doubt on the other's intentions.

Understanding these perception gaps is critical as they play a key role in determining policy. Individual perceptions determine how they interpret incoming information and make decisions. Identifying the major differences in perception between the two sides by analyzing the sources behind the perception gaps is critical. Friction has been caused as a result of how history, especially of conflict, has been taught and has influenced peoples' attitudes and perceptions.

GAP OF PERCEPTIONS

There is no doubt that the Chinese and Japanese public have diverging understandings about why ownership of the islands are in dispute in the first place. Varying interpretations of the same key events and issues can be identified through multiple sources. The dialogue programs between Chinese and Japanese participants as well as published academic articles, and news reports of the two countries during the period of time from August 2012 to February 2013, as well as the public opinion polls conducted in these two countries in the past two years have all contributed to sourcing research efforts.¹

Many scholars on both sides consider the 2010 fishing boat collision incident as a turning point of bilateral relations; however, they have quite different interpretations of this issue. In 2010, a Chinese fishing boat

collided with a Japanese official vessel. The Japanese arrested the fishing boat's captain and intended to put him on trial.

In Japan, the incident was perceived as the beginning of China acting more aggressively over the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue. Some also suspected that this aggressive behavior was part of a long-term plan to change the status quo of the East China Sea.

In China, however, the captain's arrest was seen as a sign that Japan had changed its policy toward the unwritten mutual understanding on the fishing in the Diaoyu/Senkaku area. China believed the two governments had this understanding that if a Chinese fishing boat entered within 12 nautical miles of the islands the Japanese would expel them, but not arrest them. Putting the captain on trial was seen by the Chinese as an aggressive change to the long-term practice.

Perception of the Japanese government's decision to nationalize the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands is another key issue in this tension. The Japanese government's explanation of the national purchase was that it wanted mainly to prevent Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara from purchasing the islands. Ishihara claimed he would send people to the islands and construct a lighthouse. Such action could have provoked a strong response from China and created huge diplomatic problems between the two governments. The Japanese government believed nationalization was a preventive action.

China, however, did not accept the Japanese explanation. Since the Chinese believe the Diaoyu Islands belong to China, the nationalization by another country is unacceptable for a sovereign state. Some Chinese concluded that Japan wanted to move from *de facto* administrative control to a more *de jure* exercise of sovereignty. Many Chinese also viewed it as a conspiracy between Ishihara and the Japanese government to justify the national purchase. Bear in mind that it is difficult for the Chinese to believe that the central government cannot control or influence the provincial or local governments.

Japan's nationalization of the islands led to anti-Japan demonstrations across China. The violence and crime that ensued shocked the Japanese, with many considering the Chinese response simply crazy and irrational. It was difficult for the Japanese to understand why the Chinese were so angry. Certainly, the intensity and breadth of the rage

was palpable over 100 cities across the country. But while the protests were sparked by Japan's territorial claim, many Chinese scholars believed the demonstrations were a natural response to Japan's wrongdoings for the past decades. Some considered them as patriotic reactions that simply got slightly part out of control.

Another perception gap is about the other side's longer term plans for the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Somehow, both sides suspect each other of having sophisticated master plans to change the status quo. The Chinese side speculates that Japan sees the islands as important for Japan, especially considering the natural resources in the area. It also thinks Japan wants to use the islands to claim the maritime territory between China and Japan. The Japanese harbor similar doubts about China.

Both sides also have conspiracy theories regarding each other's policies and motivations. For example, some Chinese suspect that Japan wants to use the tension over the islands a reason to amend the Japanese constitution and remove the constitutional limits on military development. On the Japanese side, some suspect that China wants to increase tensions deliberately so it can challenge Japan's current de facto administrative control over the islands.

Differences in political systems also contribute to the perception gap. As a democratic society, the Japanese have diverse opinions on almost every issue. Even the prime minister's opinions are not necessarily representative of mainstream public opinion. In China, meanwhile, even as society has become more diverse, the basic political system and the ruling party decision making have not experienced any major change. It remains a strict top-down, authoritarian structure. As a result, even some seemingly objective scholars, sometimes cannot avoid using their own political and social experiences to interpret the other country's opinions and behavior.

Both countries have a tendency to exaggerate or dwell on the impact domestic politics have in raising tensions. Many Japanese, including some senior officials, for instance, are confused about China's reactions to the tensions, and try to link them to Chinese domestic politics to understand the puzzling behavior. Some view that Chinese actions have been pushed by domestic politics, or are being manipulated to serve the interests of internal political struggle.

In China, actions and comments by individual Japanese politicians have often been used by some Chinese scholars and media as evidence of Japan's national policy and intentions. Many Chinese believe that some Japanese political figures have intentionally used China's "irrational" behavior to mobilize people for the purpose of domestic politics and elections. Shintaro Ishihara is certainly one such example. His newly established Japan Restoration Party gained 54 seats in the December 2012 lower house elections, and emerged as the third-biggest party. As a result, both China and Japan believe the other side has a secret agenda or ulterior motive. Both countries often use the extreme comments from each side as evidence to support their speculations.

CLASH OF HISTORIES

The divergent perceptions between the two nations can be first explained as a clash of two very different "senses of history"—people of the two countries have quite different attitudes and approaches towards history. One important reason for Chinese emotionality is that many people connected the current issue with historical grievance. The current issue reactivated the Chinese memory of the wars and invasions this country has suffered many years ago. However, in Japan, many Japanese believe the past wars belonged to the ancestors of both countries, and current people have no control over the historical issue. So the Japanese naturally do not connect the current issue with history.

On a deeper level, the different senses of history between the two sides are in fact the products of two very different approaches to and systems of history education. In the Chinese classroom, for example, the curriculum is heavily loaded with the contents of China's traumatic national experience from the First Opium War (1839–1842) through the end of the Sino-Japanese War in 1945. A state-run national patriotic education is conducted from kindergarten through college. In many Chinese cities, there are numerous museums, monuments, and historical sites that were established in memory of this war. All these sources of memory have made forgetting impossible.

Without understanding this background, we cannot understand why over sixty years after the end of the conflict the ghosts of war still haunt Chinese–Japanese relations. For the generation who received an education in China, the war between China and Japan has never finished. From history textbooks, public media, and popular culture, the “memory” of a war they never experienced is very fresh. Their attitude towards Japan can be easily “reactivated” by Japan’s current “aggressive” behavior, such as putting the fishing boat’s captain on trial and the action of nationalization of the islands.

However, in Japan, history education contains very little information on World War II, so the younger generations do not know much about that part of history if they do not intentionally seek more information themselves. Compared with the Chinese youth who received a top-down “patriotic education,” there are probably “generations of no history education” in Japan.

For example, one of the most debated historical issues between China and Japan is the Nanjing Massacre. In China, the official middle school history textbook uses many photos, statistics tables, eyewitness accounts, and personal anecdotes to recount this incident. It provides very detailed accounts of how people were executed on a massive scale at various execution sites and how their bodies were disposed of by the Japanese military. Numerous films, novels, historical books, and newspaper articles about the “Rape of Nanjing” have been produced in China, especially in the 1990s after the patriotic education campaign began.

However, in the 2005 edition of a junior high school textbook *New History Textbook* (*Atarashii Rekishi Kyōkasho*), published by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, there is no mention of the “Nanjing Massacre” or “Nanjing Incident.” Indeed, there is only one sentence that refers to this event: “they [the Japanese troops] occupied that city in December.”² According to a Japanese scholar’s research, only two of the seven middle school textbooks used in Japan in 2002 gave numbers for the controversial death toll of the Nanjing Massacre, while others used more ambiguous terms, such as “many” and “massive” to describe the casualties.³ In 2005, the Japanese Education Ministry’s approval of this version of *New History Textbook* actually ignited immediate outrage and large scale demonstrations in several Asian countries, especially China and South Korea.

For people of the two countries, the brutal war and this part of history have left many sensitive historical symbols between the two countries. These symbols can be “reactivated” deliberately or unintentionally, and can cause major tensions or even conflicts between the two countries. This has been the fundamental reason why the bilateral relations have always been fragile and dangerous. Indeed, historical issues and interpretations of the past have been the major barriers for a real reconciliation between the two neighbors.

CLASH OF DREAMS

From another perspective, the clash of perception between the two countries can be seen as a clash of national identities and national “dreams.” In Japan, the name of the Shintaro Ishihara’s political party is Japan Restoration Party. The kanji for restoration is *ishin* (維新). In China, the Chinese Communist Party and new leader Xi Jinping have repeatedly emphasized the main objective of the government of rejuvenation, *fu-xing* (复兴), of the Chinese nation. Xi calls it the Chinese Dream. The meanings of these two words are very similar. Both restoration and rejuvenation refer to a return to a former position. Even though the English translations of these words differ slightly, the meanings in Chinese are almost the same.

We can say that many in China and Japan actually share a common motivation; that is to bring their country back to its former position and glory. However, the content of this motivation is quite different in these two countries. For China, the most important part of rejuvenation is for the country to grow stronger and richer, returning to its central position in the world, free from foreign bullying or interference. As for the Japan Restoration Party, the meanings of “restoration” include writing a new Constitution to replace the current war-renouncing Constitution that was drafted by the United States after World War II., strengthening maritime defense capabilities, as well as abolishing the virtual cap of 1 percent of gross domestic product on defense expenditures. Even though the Japan Restoration Party is still a minority party in Japan, it has already been tied with new Japanese nationalism, some of its policy claims are also popular among some Japanese.

As we can see, both the discourses of rejuvenation and restoration are closely related with history. They both want to get rid of the historical shadows. However, the dreams' varying contents could make this a clash of dreams. In particular, a real danger of a clash of dreams may include both sides blaming the other as being an obstacle in the path to rejuvenation or restoration. For examples, some Japanese may say that China wants to block Japan's process to become a normal state, such as becoming a permanent member of the Security Council. Some Chinese also say that China's rejuvenation should be based on receiving historical justice.

For a long time, the concepts of historical memory are theoretically and empirically among the least developed questions in "mainstream" international relations. What happened during the recent months in East Asia have once again suggested that historical memory (and its expression in nationalism and history education) is a key source of divergent perceptions, persistent security dilemmas and ongoing disputes over territory. Historical memory is not just a psychological issue or something only related to perception and attitude. It is actually the key elements of constructing national identity. History and memory are rarely the direct causes of conflict, but the lens of historical memory helps both the masses and the elites interpret the present and decide on future policies.

However, no country should be a prisoner of its past. As Johan Galtung commented, "we are not handcuffed to history, but a high level of consciousness about the nature of those handcuffs is needed, as well as a willingness to become liberated."⁴ If both countries see each other as a barrier for their dream, then unfortunately conflict will become inevitable between the two neighbors. Conversely, if the two countries could see each other as a partner for their common needs and shared interest of prosperity and peace, then we can expect a new Asian miracle of peace and development.

Without knowing the root cause, relationship issues cannot be repaired. China and Japan should be able to bring these suppressed differences of perception to the surface. Both should at least know what the other country's perspective is and reasoning behind the perspective. Even though it is quite difficult for both to agree, they should recognize the main differences and reasons behind the other's claims. Without

addressing this deep source and tough obstacle, it would be impossible for preventing conflict and establishing a sustainable relationship between the two neighbors.

NOTES

1. Such as the Genron NPO and the China Daily joint annual survey on Chinese and Japanese peoples' attitudes toward each other's countries, and on bilateral ties.
2. See Kanji, Nishio, et al., eds. *Atarashii Rekishi Kyokasho* [New History Textbook]. Tokyo: Fusosha, 2005. 49.
3. Takashi Yoshida, "Advancing or Obstructing Reconciliation? Changes in History Education and Disputes over History Textbooks in Japan," In *Teaching the Violent Past*, edited by Elizabeth Cole. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007, 68–69.
4. Johan Galtung, "The Construction of National Identities for Cosmic Drama: Chosenness-Myths-Trauma (CMT) Syndromes and Cultural Pathologies." In *Handcuffed to History*, edited by P. Udayakumar. Westport: Praeger, 2001, 61.