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The Diaoyu/Senkaku Dispute as an Identity-Based Conflict: Toward Sino-Japan Reconciliation

TATSUSHI ARAI AND ZHENG WANG

SUMMARY

Security in East Asia is at risk as a result of the territorial dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. While political and economic factors are behind the tensions, at the root of the tensions is history, and the conflict of national identity between China and Japan. As such, rising tension over the islands activates the collective memories of their divided pasts and appeals to their national identities. The resulting mutual distrust helps develop the two societies' mental templates that define their expectations of future bilateral relations. To avoid a further escalation of the conflict, policymakers and civil society leaders on both sides must first recognize the powerful role that their national identities play in historical conflict. They must then face serious questions in search of a way forward: Should China and Japan let the escalating tension take its due course without treating its root causes, as they have done repeatedly in the past? Or should they decisively tackle these causes this time, to build conditions for Sino-Japan reconciliation? The following steps can be implemented to diffuse tension and promote reconciliation:

- The Chinese and Japanese national leaders appeal to symbolic gestures of conciliation, including meetings with overseas community representatives of the other side.

- The two sides diversify alternative channels of bi-communal dialogue that actively brings together media professionals, committed critics of conciliatory measures, and other dividers and connectors in China-Japan relations.
- Respected opinion leaders on both sides establish a High-Level China-Japan Council on the East China Sea, whose mandate is to orchestrate the proposed multi-track exchange and complement the existing government-supported mechanisms of bilateral exchange.
- China and Japan launch national and bi-national dialogues on the future of history education, with emphasis on an appropriate content of history textbooks.

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REGIONAL SECURITY IS AT RISK as a result of conflict between China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. It also underscores the two sides' competing economic interests over the East China Sea and illustrates the complexity of their domestic politics as reflected in their foreign policy. Beyond the security, economic, and political challenges, however, the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute is an identity-based conflict in which the two nations' divergent perceptions, attitudes and intentions interact intensely with one another. Based on this understanding, this article analyzes the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute as an identity-based conflict and explores concrete policy-oriented ways in which China and Japan can tackle the roots of this conflict.

National identity is a collective sense of who we are as a nation. It embodies and expresses the nation's collective memory of its past experience by way of shared symbols, ceremonies, and narratives. National identity also shapes and reshapes the interpretive lenses through which the national community makes sense of new experience. Identity-based conflicts drive the opposing nations' historical experiences to bear on the present crisis, activate their collective traumas and glories that continue to haunt and divide them, and project such a polarizing image of the divisive past as a metal template to frame future expectations.

Given these historical trends in the evolution of the Chinese and Japanese national identities, we recognize that transformation of the identity-based conflict over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands requires a long-term process of *creating a new historical experience* of tolerance and coexistence within each nation and between them. Such a historical process, as illustrated by Franco-German and U.S.-Japanese reconciliation, requires generations of time to bear fruits. Despite the far-reaching nature of the vision of Sino-Japan reconciliation, however, we advocate that the two nations choose to see the current crisis as an opportunity to self-reflect on the recurring patterns of their identity-based conflict and accelerate their joint effort to seek genuine reconciliation.

There are four ways in which China and Japan can de-escalate the tension over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and simultaneously use the momentum of de-escalation as a step toward long-term reconciliation. Firstly, national leaders on both sides can use effective symbols and gestures of conciliation to communicate their intent. Secondly, there can be an array of alternative

channels of bi-communal dialogue that complements official negotiations. Thirdly, a High-Level China-Japan Council on the East China Sea can be established to coordinate a sustained multi-track dialogue. Finally, a long-term process of reforming history education in both societies to promote Sino-Japan reconciliation can be put in place.

RECOMMENDATION 1: INTRODUCE SYMBOLIC GESTURES OF CONCILIATION

Transformation of an identity-based conflict requires finding effective ways to communicate ideas and feelings that appeal to the general public of the other side. Based on this understanding, we call for both government and civil society leaders in China and Japan to explore a creative use of conciliatory gestures and symbols that help mitigate public distrust. National leaders of each side can meet with the overseas community members of the other side, receive government and civil society delegations from the other nation, and actively participate in sports and cultural activities that restore human connection between China and Japan.

This proposal is supported by the observation that the Chinese media and public spoke highly of a series of high-profile visits to China in January 2013 by former Japanese Prime Ministers Tomiichi Murayama and Yukio Hatoyama, and New Komeito Party Leader Natsuo Yamaguchi. The Chinese public discussion on Hatoyama's visit to the Nanjing Massacre Victim Memorial Hall was especially positive as his visit demonstrated respect for Chinese national identity. These examples of humanizing gestures suggest the potential role of symbolic action in restoring lost public confidence and mitigating an emotionally invested identity conflict. We infer from these examples that the Chinese leaders will also benefit from adopting humanizing gestures of communication that appeal directly to the concerned Japanese public.

In addition, the two sides should exercise self-restraint when they appeal to symbolic gestures. Caution is needed as insensitive appeals to emotional symbols that represent the two nations' historical conflicts can reactivate their collective memories of the tragic past and even provoke fresh conflicts. Given the highly volatile situation that the two nations currently face, they should exercise

maximum self-restraint not to evoke these historical symbols. For example, Japan's prime minister and senior officials must refrain from visiting Yasukuni Shrine. Political figures of both sides should avoid making provocative speeches even when they address such speeches to their own domestic audiences.

RECOMMENDATION 2: DIVERSIFY THE CHANNELS AND METHODS OF BILATERAL DIALOGUE

To prevent a further escalation of the ongoing crisis, the two governments can initiate a series of summit meetings and high-level official dialogues. There are limits, however, to government-led processes. After all, formal government meetings that discuss predetermined positions are not designed to transform identity-based conflicts rooted in the contested meaning of historical experience. Moreover, domestic constituents in each society tend to prioritize their own needs over the other society's needs and constrain their government's flexibility in bilateral negotiation.

Long-term transformation of the identity-based conflict between China and Japan requires bringing influential domestic constituents on both sides together to have direct communication with one another, while diversifying the methods of dialogue that appeal to their national identities. A multi-track dialogue for engaging diverse opinion leaders, such as media professionals and influential social critics, could prove effective.

(1) Develop a multi-track framework of China-Japan dialogue

A series of alternative channels of dialogue can be established to bring together a bi-national group of representatives from civil society organizations (including youth and women's groups), athletic and artist communities, educational and research institutions, media organizations, and companies and industry groups. In terms of this last category, bi-national representatives engaged in fishing, resource and energy development, maritime transportation, tourism, and environment will be especially important.

These alternative channels, if carefully orchestrated, will diversify voices that broaden the historical and cultural meaning of the East China Sea,

transcend the inherent limitation of creativity in closed-door official negotiations, and make China-Japan relations more community-oriented and people-centered. Voices of opinion leaders who have access to both senior government leaders and the grassroots should be prioritized. Prominent authors, public intellectuals, and newscasters exemplify such versatile “mid-level leaders” who enjoy public trust and exercise some level of independent judgment that transcends official government positions. In political crisis, government officials must strategically partner with them, instead of marginalizing their voices.

(2) Introduce media professionals’ dialogues

Recognizing the influential role of the countries’ media in the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute, a media exchange program for mutual learning should be considered. According to a bi-national opinion survey conducted in 2012 by an independent Japanese nonprofit organization, the Genron NPO, in partnership with leading Chinese research institutions, 83 percent of the Chinese respondents and 96 percent of the Japanese respondents use the news media of their own country as a source of information to learn about the other country. The same survey shows that only 2 percent of the Chinese respondents and 17 percent of the Japanese respondents have been to the other country.¹ These findings cogently demonstrate that media organizations in each society play a decisive role in shaping the public image of the other side and in appealing to the national consciousness of their own society.

Regular and frequent exchange between major media organizations on both sides should deepen mutual understanding of news production on China-Japan relations in general, and on the conflict over the East China Sea in particular. Proposed activities include learning together about the media’s role in conflict escalation and resolution, visiting places of historical significance on the other side to discuss news coverage for reconciliation, and engaging the participants in well-facilitated bi-communal dialogues on their own national identities and their perceptions of the other society. These bi-communal activities can enable media professionals on both sides to work together to produce multi-angled news analyses on issues related to the East China Sea and on other subjects of mutual interest.

(3) Facilitate direct bi-national contact among committed critics of the other society

To address the roots of each society's negative views of the other side, we propose bringing together influential critics who advocate forceful action against the other side and resist any gestures of Sino-Japan reconciliation. Proposed dialogues seek to facilitate direct contact between them as private citizens, regardless of their institutional affiliations and positions. Influential individuals in national security, foreign policy, business, literature, and history education will be of special importance. A bi-national team of trusted, experienced facilitators will convene the dialogues and ensure their confidentiality. The objective of these difficult yet much-needed dialogues is to directly engage these people spearheading the most critical responses to the other side's conflict behavior, and enable each side to learn firsthand about the human bases of their opposing views. If the participants from both sides choose to appear in public together and decide to take joint action to promote mutual understanding, their examples of China-Japan partnership will strongly appeal to their own domestic constituents.

RECOMMENDATION 3: ESTABLISH A HIGH-LEVEL CHINA-JAPAN COUNCIL ON THE EAST CHINA SEA

To coordinate multiple channels of bi-national dialogue effectively, we propose establishing a High-Level China-Japan Council on the East China Sea. The council will be comprised of respected Chinese and Japanese opinion leaders of diverse professional and communal backgrounds. The primary functions of the council consist of: (a) orchestrating mutually beneficial interactions between the multiple channels of dialogue, (b) disseminating findings from these dialogues to the public on both sides and to international stakeholders, and (c) setting an authoritative tone in public to promote a socially responsible manner in which these diverse, decentralized channels of dialogue can address sensitive issues. In addition, the council may express opinions, interpretations, and recommendations when there is a need for preventing potential crises over the East China Sea from escalating into serious international disputes. While the

proposed council must enjoy a high level of political autonomy from the two governments, it will need to coordinate closely with the government-led negotiations in terms of exchanging lessons learned.

Despite the bilateral tension and the recent shifts in government leadership, we strongly urge the two sides to uphold and implement the agreement that Foreign Ministers Yang Jiechi and Koichiro Gemba reached in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on July 11, 2012 to launch a “China-Japan People-to-People Exchange Council,” an inter-governmental mechanism that systematically expands and strengthens China-Japan civil society exchange². We also support the two foreign ministers’ agreement to continue bilateral dialogue under the China-Japan Friendship Committee for the 21st Century, a working group comprised of former officials, leading scholars, and opinion leaders on both sides to jointly make recommendations to their governments, recognizing the past three decades of the committee’s cumulative effort³. The proposed High-Level China-Japan Council on the East China Sea will not only build on these existing mechanisms but also supplement them with a special mandate designed to promote a long-term transformation of the identity-based conflict over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

RECOMMENDATION 4: LAUNCH NATIONAL AND BI-NATIONAL DIALOGUES ON THE FUTURE OF HISTORY EDUCATION

The crisis over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands presents an unprecedented opportunity for both Chinese and Japanese societies to reflect deeply on their national identities. They must proactively seize this opportunity to launch national dialogues on the future of history education. However, in order to turn the current crisis into an opportunity, the two sides must realize that history education is not an ordinary subject because it fundamentally defines their national identities. Self-centered, exclusive discourses in history education, for example, would generate negative perceptions and hostile images of one another, and cause excessive inflexibility in territorial disputes. Without addressing these underlying roots of hostility, the two nations will be unable to build a normal relationship.

Considering the profound impact of history education, the Chinese government needs to reflect on the long-term consequences of its history education program. Even though a country has the right to teach its own history in formats it prefers, Chinese educators should realize that the current Chinese curriculum and approach have indeed bolstered a form of nationalism based on ethnic animosity. Also, the representations of war-time violence in various mediums of popular Chinese culture have been excessive and unrestricted. They have profoundly influenced the younger generations' perceptions and attitudes. In an increasingly interconnected world, it is very important that education encourages a broader perspective to understand past events and cultivates global citizenship.

Japan, on the other hand, must build history education that integrates self-critical views of its destructive past into a constructive outlook on its future. To facilitate such a nationwide process of awareness-building, Japan must realize that denial of its aggressive past would not only delay much-needed historical reconciliation, but also undermine the moral foundations on which the Japanese liberal democracy has been built since the end of the Second World War.

Looking forward, we propose that the governments and civil society organizations on both sides actively support joint history research and prioritize resource allocations to promote it. More specifically, we suggest national and bi-national initiatives to review history textbooks and produce new ones based on rigorous scholarly discussion and public dialogue. We also suggest improved teacher training that skillfully integrates a self-reflective understanding of each nation's tragic past into constructive dialogue on its future potential.

In support of these Chinese and Japanese efforts to review their history education, two lessons learned from European experience should be highlighted. The first of these is the value of incorporating not only one country's views of historical events and their significance, but also other relevant actors' perspectives whenever appropriate. The point of this lesson is to cultivate both teachers' and students' capacities to empathize with those affected by the history of war so that they can think of their roles in international society in relation to other nations. The second lesson is to supplement *national* history with East Asian or Asia-Pacific *communal*

history, putting one country's notion of history in a broader context of regional interdependence. By providing alternative perspectives, history education in China and Japan will enable its participants to cultivate deep empathy with victims of violence, resist discrimination against cultural others, and instill self-confidence within them as a basis for inter-communal coexistence and reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

A series of recommendations outlined above illustrate an underlying theme: while historical experiences of nations create identity-based conflicts, national communities can redefine the meaning of their destructive past and create a new historical experience that facilitates the transformation of their conflicts.

To build a constructive national experience that actively promotes reconciliation, a skillful use of symbolic gestures, humanizing dialogues, and alternative discourses can be made. To reduce tension over the ongoing crisis in the East China Sea, national leaders on both sides need to create opportunities for humanizing encounters with members of the other national community. To diversify the channels and methods of Sino-Japan dialogue, a multi-track approach to people-to-people exchange that includes media professionals and committed critics of conciliatory measures should be taken. To coordinate the multi-track exchange, a High-Level China-Japan Council on the East China Sea should be established. Finally, to create conditions for long-term reconciliation, national and bi-national dialogues on the future of history education must be launched, with emphasis on the proper content of history textbooks.

There are, of course, numerous obstacles that stand in the way. The inertia of history certainly prevents both nations from having a constructive outlook of the future. Their pessimism is derived in part from their failure to make substantive progress in historical reconciliation seven decades after the Second World War and four decades after the normalization of Sino-Japan relations. Confronted by the shared dilemma of the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute, however, both societies must

now critically reflect on this inertia of the past in a much broader historical and global context.

Contemporary history of post-war reconciliation, from Franco-German rapprochement to U.S.-Japan friendship, illustrates that former enemies can reconcile if they have the political will to do so. These historical precedents of international reconciliation suggest that the enduring mistrust between Chinese and Japanese societies represents a cumulative effect of the two sides' political *choices*, not an inevitable destiny that must bind them forever. Viewed from this historical and global perspective, the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute presents both China and Japan an unprecedented opportunity to confront the past, reflect on their national identities, and take decisive steps toward genuine reconciliation.

NOTES

1. These figures are adopted from p. 38 of the 8th Japan-China Joint Public Opinion Survey, 2012, available in Japanese at: <http://www.genron-npo.net/pdf/forum2012.pdf>
2. A record of the Japan-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting on July 11, 2012 is found at: http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/meeting1207_fm.html. Importantly, Japan's new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe expressed his commitment to expanding people-to-people exchange between Japan and China during his visit to Washington DC in February 2013. His statement in effect reaffirmed the Japanese commitment to the relevant portion of the inter-ministerial agreement in July 2012. Abe's speech on February 22, 2013 may be viewed at: <http://csis.org/multimedia/video-statesmens-forum-he-shinzo-abe-prime-minister-japan>.
3. A brief history of the New Japan-China Friendship Committee for the 21st Century is found at: <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/committee0507.html>