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Present Situation and Prospect of China-Japan Security Relations

By Zhang Tuosheng

In September 2012, Japan “nationalized” Diaoyu Islands, to which China reacted strongly. A serious political security crisis broke out between China and Japan. The two countries went to the edge of a military conflict. The political security crisis is now under certain control. However, the crisis has not been completely resolved and China-Japan security relations remain abnormal. How will this relationship develop?

Here I'd like to make three points of observations.

Point one, at present China-Japan security relations are still confronted with serious difficulties.

First, there are many maritime disputes and frictions between the two sides. These include dispute over sovereignty of Diaoyu Islands, disputes over EEZ and division of continental shelf in the East China Sea, PLA navy going into Western Pacific through the Japanese archipelago and overlapping of air defense identification zones. As to

how these disputes and frictions should be resolved, the two sides still do not have basic understanding. Frictions in the East China Sea have relaxed to certain extent in recent months mainly due to self-restraint on both sides, which is obviously fragile, unreliable and insufficient to effectively control maritime differences and risks between the two countries for a long time.

Second, China and Japan are in a posture of mutual military confrontation. The Diaoyu Islands crisis in 2012 have not only led to political tension and economic retrogression but also had major impact on their military guidelines, deployments and expenditures. The influence is especially obvious on the part of Japan. The three military security documents Japan adopted at the end of last year talks about strengthened military deployment to its southwest and explicitly identified China as the main potential military threat to guard against. Japan also initiated to revise the US-Japan defense guidelines and enhance vigilance and balance against China together with the US. In the past two years, both countries have had frequent military exercises in the East China Sea and military ships and aircrafts have had frequent encounters and even dangerous ones. It is known that readjustment of military security policy and military deployment tends to be long-term and can't be easily changed once completed. The confrontational posture between the two countries could have long-term negative influences on their security relations.

Third, strategic mutual suspicion between the two countries is at historical high. Such mutual suspicion has gradually surfaced since the end of the Cold War, as shown in the prevailing China threat theory in Japan and the Chinese worry about Japan taking the old path of militarism. The former reflects Japan's distorted mentality towards rapid modernization of national defense in China and the latter reflects China's deep wariness of the rightist tendency in Japanese politics. An important backdrop of increasing mutual suspicion is the changing balance of power between the two sides since the beginning of the new century. For years, China and Japan have actually done a lot to increase

trust and dispel suspicions. However, the strategic mutual suspicion has never been fundamentally eliminated. After the outbreak of Diaoyu Islands crisis, in face of strong reactions from China, talks about Chinese military threats increased dramatically in Japan. At the same time, as the Abe government has moved to strengthen Japan-US alliance, beautify Japanese history of aggression, pursue historical revisionism, revise Japan's constitution and lift ban on collective self-defense, China's worry about Japan's strategic direction has also markedly increased. In this situation, strategic mutual suspicion has rapidly grown to a historic high since the normalization of Sino-Japanese relations. Deepened threat perceptions have become major obstacles for the two countries to improve their security relations.

Fourth, main dialogue and exchange mechanisms between the foreign affairs and defense departments have not been resumed. Since serious deterioration of political and security relations in 2012, foreign and defense departments have maintained contacts at the working level. However, up to now, they have not resumed formal dialogue or contact at or above deputy ministerial level. Military and security exchanges are still stalled. The Sino-Japanese security relationship is still in a state of abnormality. Such a state is adverse to controlling differences or reducing misunderstanding or miscalculation. It is an obstacle to bilateral cooperation.

Point two, there have been some signs of bilateral security relations moving towards stability and improvement

As both sides have exercised self-restraint and adopted important crisis management measures, situation in waters around Diaoyu Islands, which was believed to be with biggest risks, has gradually stabilized. At present, patrolling there are law enforcement ships of the two countries. Neither side has dispatched military forces there nor have they set feet on the islands.

Up until the first half of this year, the two sides had had frequent frictions in other parts of the East China Sea and high sea of the Western

Pacific, leading to repeated representations and protests. As it was both countries' military ships and aircrafts that encountered, engaged or got extremely close to each other, the frictions embodied huge risks. Nevertheless, in the past few months, some subtle yet important changes have taken place. There hasn't been news about new frictions or new dangers in the media. This is attributable to more cautious policies and crisis management measures adopted by both sides.

This year the two sides have engaged in some informal contact and meetings on international occasions, the most eye-catching of which were the two meetings between Foreign Ministers in August and September. Bilaterally, exchanges between the ruling parties, friendly organizations and local governments have had visible recovery. Recently President Li Xiaolin of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries visited Japan. During the visit, Abe talked with her and the two watched a Chinese dance performance together.

After decreasing for two consecutive years, two-way economic and trade volume has again increased this year. Number of Chinese tourists to Japan has also resumed growth and may even register a historical high. Not long ago the jointly held Beijing-Tokyo Forum conducted a joint opinion poll, which showed that although the public of either side still has very low good feelings towards the other side both find it necessary to improve bilateral relations (with 70% supportive to this on both sides). These changes are positive for the improvement of security relations.

China and Japan resumed high-level consultation on maritime security in Qingdao in late September after a two-year interval. During the consultation, the two sides agreed in principle that they would relaunch consultation on maritime liaison mechanism between defense departments and have another round of high-level consultation on maritime affairs at the end of this year or beginning of next year. This is an important progress in bilateral security relations essential to strengthening crisis and risk management in the East China Sea. The progress was recognized by security experts participating in the Tokyo-Beijing Forum held at the end of September.

For quite some time the two sides have maintained contacts for realizing a meeting between their national leaders during the APEC summit in Beijing. There have been public statements as well as private conversations. Efforts have also been made by think tanks and in public and people-to-people diplomacy to strive for such a meeting. In recent months, the international media war between the two countries has clearly cooled down, informal diplomatic contacts have gradually increased and maritime security dialogue has been resumed. All of these have something to do with efforts in this regard.

Point three, the future direction of China-Japan security relations remains uncertain

After the Diaoyu Islands crisis, China-Japan relations once experienced extreme tension, with voices on an un-avoidable war between them resounding. At that time, I put forward three scenarios with regard to the crisis situation and possible prospects of their political and security relations.

The first is that the two sides have an accidental event in the East China Sea, waters surrounding Diaoyu Islands in particular, leading to crisis escalating out of control and triggering military conflict or even war, with complete breakup between China and Japan. That will be the worst case scenario.

The second is that with some tense battle Japan recognizes in certain form the existence of territorial dispute and the two sides reach new consensus or tacit understanding on Diaoyu Islands. And at the same time the two sides re-establish the policy of taking history as the mirror and facing the future on the question of history and Japanese leaders refrain from paying tribute to the Yashukuni Shrine. In these circumstances, bilateral relations will gradually move towards stability and normality and make new progress. That will be the best scenario, which will be very difficult to realize.

The third is that Diaoyu Islands crisis gets managed gradually and

the military conflict avoided, however the two sides fail to reach new common understanding on major friction issues such as island dispute and history, so that the bilateral ties fall into a stalemate. In this situation, some dialogue and cooperation may be resumed but it will be difficult to fundamentally improve political and security relations. The ties will show a feature of “Cold politics and cool economy” in a long period of time. That’s the most likely prospect.

It now seems that the worst case scenario can be excluded. Because both sides have realized that dispute over Diaoyu Islands is not the entirety of their relations and they still have major common interests in many areas. Both are aware that in the new international situation, confrontation or war between major powers will only have a lose-lose result. It is equally important that not only China and Japan wish to avoid military conflict but also the international community, East Asian countries and the USA – Japan’s main ally—do not wish to see a military conflict or war between the two countries. In this connection, I firmly believe that even when there is unfortunately an accidental conflict at sea between China and Japan it will not easily lead to serious military conflict or war.

Then will the best scenario unfold in the near future, i.e., reaching new common understanding and enabling bilateral relations to comprehensively improve and develop? I think the likelihood of this scenario turning real in the near or mid term is low although both China and Japan are making efforts towards the end and other countries are having hope for it.

As to the bilateral summit meeting during APEC, the Chinese government has insisted that Japan should recognize the existence of sovereignty dispute over Diaoyu Islands (because only with such a recognition can the both sides develop dialogue and seek resolution) and that Japanese leaders should make a commitment not to pay tribute to the Yashukuni Shrine where 14 Class A war criminals are worshipped. I find the two demands completely rational. But judging from the current situation, the two sides still differ on them. APEC is opening soon

and there is little time left for the two sides to find consensus or tacit understanding.

It is predictable that if China and Japan can finally reach certain common understanding (even a tacit one) on their major differences and their leaders formally meet during APEC meeting it is possible for bilateral relations to have much improvement in the future. However, if the two sides are not able to seize the opportunity offered by APEC for a formal summit meeting, then it will be difficult to break the stalemate in bilateral political and security relations and it is possible that their frictions may increase again. Next year Japan will amend a series of laws and regulations so as to lift the ban on collective self-defense and seek a permanent membership at the UN Security Council. The year 2015 also marks the 70th anniversary of the anti-fascist and anti-Japanese war and China will have many commemorations. Then if there will still not be some basic common understanding on Daiyou Islands and history bilateral relations will likely run into more troubles.

So in order to consolidate the signs of relaxation and prevent increase of frictions, I think it is essential for China and Japan to make efforts on the following three aspects after APEC.

The first is to advance maritime security consultation and reopen consultation on maritime liaison mechanism between defense departments and through dialogues turn the self-restraint currently exercised by the two sides in the East China Sea into effective crisis management mechanism and code of conduct, therefore truly enhancing crisis and risk management in the East China Sea.

Second, while formal leadership meeting and exchange of visits can not be resumed any time soon, the two sides should take steps to resume first the main dialogue and exchange mechanisms between them, including defense dialogues and exchanges. The Chinese side was prepared to do so at the end of last year. It was Abe's sudden visit to the Yashukuni Shrine that obstructed dialogue recovery. It is hoped that Japan will not create such obstacles again.

Third, in areas of common interests, the two sides should spare no effort to develop all possible economic and security co-operations so as to actively expanding the positive aspects of bilateral relations.

In my view, if China and Japan can make positive progress in these three areas it will play an important role and lay down a necessary foundation to promote stability and improvement of bilateral relations in the near and mid term, to reduce military confrontation and strategic mutual suspicion in the longer future and to ultimately resolve the historical issue and territorial dispute that has plagued bilateral relations for a long time.

Finally, I would like to conclude my speech by quoting a passage from the fourth political document between China and Japan. “The two sides confirm that the two countries are mutual cooperation partners and do not pose a threat to each other. The two sides reiterate that they will support each other’s peaceful development. The two sides firmly believe that China and Japan, both pursuing peaceful development, will bring about huge opportunities and benefits to Asia and the world.” I think this is the only correct choice for the development of China-Japan relations. The two sides should have confidence to overcome the current serious difficulties and strive to return to this correct path at an early date.

Edited by Dr. Gui Yongtao, Dr. Lei Shaohua

Tel: 86-10-62756376

Email: iiss@pku.edu.cn

Fax: 86-10-62753063

Web: www.iiss.pku.edu.cn

Address: IISS, Peking University, Beijing, China