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**The *Diaoyu/Senkaku* Dispute in the Context of
China-U.S.-Japan Trilateral Dynamics**

Zhang Yun

**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies
Singapore**

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ABSTRACT

Why has China been more assertive and resolute towards Japan in dealing the *Diaoyu/Senkaku* dispute since 2010? What logic has guided China's new strategy and policy? How should we assess the effectiveness of China's approach? This paper seeks to demonstrate that a trilateral perspective on U.S., Chinese, and Japanese relations is vital for answering these questions.

In the current conjuncture – one that is shaped by global economic turbulence and a rebalancing of U.S. power towards Asia – China perceives the *Diaoyu/Senkaku* dispute as a key moment for establishing a new, great power relationship with the United States. China understands the conflict as a *de facto* strategic game between itself and the United States, one that works behind a façade of Sino-Japanese confrontation. The dynamic adjustments in U.S.-China relations over the past several years is the primary variable in China's approach to dealing with this dispute, which seems to have replaced Taiwan as the test of U.S.-China strategic intents and military capabilities in the western Pacific. China does not deny or neglect the U.S.-Japanese relationship, but strongly opposes any form of anti-Chinese alliance on this matter.

Several factors have discouraged a proactive Chinese policy towards Japan since 2010. These include previous failures in Sino-Japanese diplomacy, domestic divisions within Japan on these issues, and the Chinese perception of a dramatic right-wing turn in Japan. For these reasons, China seeks only a passive engagement with Japan, focusing instead on Sino-U.S. relations as the core dynamic of this dispute.

In the immediate term, China's new assertiveness on this issue have produced several consequences, including a fortification of the U.S.-Japanese alliance, a movement towards autonomous military capacity building in Japan, and spill over concerns for other ASEAN countries. However, China seems to believe that clearer signals of its intentions would help reduce miscalculations and accelerate the long-term repositioning of Sino-U.S. relations.

On strategic grounds, it might be politically wise and cost-effective for China to concentrate its resources on repositioning U.S.-Sino relations. But, on tactical grounds, this less-balanced approach might risk damaging China's soft power. Without sophisticated public diplomacy, China's statements and actions towards Japan might alienate the Japanese public and deleteriously affect China's image. In this sense, it would be tactically astute for China to be sensitive to public opinion in Japan and to invest more resources and effort in public diplomacy in Asia.

Dr Zhang Yun is Associate Professor of International Relations at the National Niigata University, Japan. He obtained PhD in Law from Peking University and PhD in International Relations from Waseda University. He served as a visiting scholar at the Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2010-2011). He also served as a visiting scholar at the Japan Institute for Social and Economic Affairs, Federation of Japanese Business (Keidanren). He is a visiting professor for Beijing Foreign Studies University. His research expertise includes China-Japan-U.S. trilateral relations, international relations in the Asia Pacific and security studies. Dr Zhang has published three monograph books and many papers in English, Chinese and Japanese academic journals. He is also an invited columnist for *Lianhe Zaobao* with his personal column *Zongheng Tianxia*, where he has regularly published numerous articles on international relations.

The *Diaoyu/Senkaku* Dispute in the Context of China-U.S.-Japan Trilateral Dynamics

Introduction

The *Diaoyu/Senkaku* territorial dispute has been an unresolved conflict between China and Japan since the normalisation of diplomatic ties in 1972. However, both countries have, until recently, deliberately managed the conflict so as to avoid damaging other forms of positive, bilateral engagement. Since 2010, though, Sino-Japanese relations have deteriorated over precisely this dispute, which has replaced historical issues as the most poisonous element in bilateral relations. Unlike in the past, China has showed unprecedented resolve in dealing with Japan by frequently deploying coast guard vessels in surrounding waters and by claiming sovereignty through legal arguments particularly after the nationalisation of the *Diaoyu/Senkaku* Islands by Japan in 2012. Large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations have also occurred in many Chinese cities and high-level inter-state meetings, as well as social and cultural interactions have been negatively affected. In November 2013, China also announced the creation of an Air-Defence Identification Zone in the East China Sea.

In this context, many experts have asked why China abandoned its previously more constrained policy stance. The conventional wisdom considers China's recent dealing with the *Diaoyu/Senkaku* conflict as a sign of its newly found confidence, its burgeoning nationalism, or its domestic power struggles.¹ However, as this policy brief argues, a more careful scrutiny is required to explain China's strategy.

On the surface, the dispute mainly involves China and Japan. But, from the beginning, the United States has been a crucial factor, not only for historical reasons but also for its military alliance with Japan. In the perspective offered here, the *trilateral dynamics* between China, Japan, and the United States are most significant, with Sino-U.S. interactions functioning as the primary variable in this conflict. To develop this analysis, this policy brief analyses the logic of Chinese strategy and tactics in handling the *Diaoyu/Senkaku* dispute since 2010. In particular, it answers two questions: first, how does China view the Sino-U.S. relationship and the U.S.-Japan alliance in the context of this dispute? And second, how does China assess the impact of its strategy on Japan? After answering these questions, this policy brief will reflect on the near- and long-term implications of Chinese policy as it pertains to this dispute and to China's future rise.

¹ Elizabeth C. Economy, "The Game Changer: Coping with China's Foreign Policy Revolution," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.89, No.6 (November/December, 2011). Akio Takahara, "Chogoku Wa Donoyona Henkaga Okiteiruka" [What Kind of Changes are Taking Place in China?], *Sekai*, No.12, 2012, pp.100-107. Yoshikazu Shimizu, *Taigai Kyoko Shisei to Kokunaiseiji* [Externally Hawkish China and its Domestic Politics], Ryosei Kokubun (eds), *Chogoku Wa Ima* [China Now], Iwanami Shinsho, 2011, pp:1-18.

Behind the Façade: A *De Facto* Sino-U.S. Contest

The Chinese perspective on Asian security is that the trilateral relations among Japan, China, and the United States are in reality a contest between China on the one hand and the U.S.-Japanese alliance on the other, with Japan playing a subordinate role in the latter.² In other words, China does not regard Japan as an independent variable in its calculation of regional security. For China, the *Diaoyu/Senkaku* dispute is not only a territorial issue but also a maritime security problem in which the U.S. is a dominant player. The Chinese state also believes deeply that these issues were partly triggered by the United States in the context of its post-war settlement in Asia and the reversion of Okinawa to Japan.³ In this sense, China sees the dispute more as a Sino-U.S. one than a Sino-Japanese one. Indeed, the rapid adjustment of Sino-U.S. relations in recent years serves as a primary variable in China's dealing with this dispute.

From this standpoint, the incident that sparked the new confrontation over *Diaoyu/Senkaku* – namely, the 2010 collision between a Chinese fishing boat and a Japanese Coast Guard vessel – occurred in the context of structural shifts in Sino-U.S. relations. In 2005, the United States identified China as a “responsible stakeholder” and encouraged China to further integrate itself into the U.S.-led international system.⁴ This decision was based on the pre-eminence of U.S. power at the time and on the U.S.-dominated alliance network in Asia. However, the global economic crisis of 2008 raised questions of the United States' pre-dominance or primacy. Adding to this, in 2009, Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama embraced a dual policy of diplomatic distance from the United States and bandwagoning on China.⁵ In this context, the Obama administration announced, in 2009, an intention of re-balancing towards Asia and, as part of this, warned Japan of pursuing foreign policy autonomy.⁶ In 2010, the United States also increased arms sales to Taiwan at a time when cross-strait relations were improving, and intervened publicly in the South China Sea disputes, causing a verbal conflict between U.S. and Chinese foreign ministers at the 2010 ARF meeting.⁷ Needless to say, all of these elements of the U.S. ‘pivot’ to Asia served to deepen China's distrust of U.S. strategic intentions.⁸ In particular, they impelled a perception that America's ultimate goal was to maintain regional if not global hegemony, and to constrain or even upset China's rise.⁹ With this in mind, the Fishing Boat Collision and the ensuing arrest of the Chinese captain was widely considered by Chinese experts as

² Niu Jun, “Zhongmeiri Anquanguanxi yu Dongya Anquan Huanjing [China-Japan-US Security Relations and East Asia Security Environment],” Wang Jisi, Yuan Ming and Chen Zhirui (eds), *Beida Guoji Luncong 2006* [Beida International Studies Collection 2006] (Beijing: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 2006), p.223.

³ Jean-Marc F. Blanchard, The U.S. Role in the Sino-Japanese Dispute over the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands, 1945-71, *The China Quarterly*, No. 161, Mar. 2000, 95-123.

⁴ Robert B. Zoellick, *From Membership to Responsibility?*, Remarks to National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, September 21, 2005.

⁵ Yukio Hatoyama, “A New Path for Japan,” *The New York Times*, August 26, 2009.

⁶ “Omoi Chumon to Mirubekida Obama Tokyo Enzestu [Obama Speech in Tokyo should be Treated as a Heavy Instruction],” *Mainichi Shinbun*, November 15, 2009.

⁷ Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), p.104-105.

⁸ Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust*, John L. Thornton China Center Monograph Series, Number 4, March 2012, p.13.

⁹ Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, viii.

a product of, or a corollary to, the U.S. posture in Asia.¹⁰ For this reason, China seemed to regard the incident as a signal from Washington and reacted with unprecedented resoluteness.¹¹ The fact that the United States played a crucial role in releasing the captain also raised Chinese suspicions.¹² In dealing with the 2010 confrontation, then, Beijing was more interested in Washington's intentions than in Tokyo's.

Ironically, the 2010 Sino-Japanese confrontation over the *Diaoyu/Senkaku* islands forced China to think anew on how to manage U.S., not Japanese, relations, in several respects.¹³ First, China's policymakers and strategists agreed that the United States was the only power with capacity and intention to pose an overall threat to China and that direct confrontation with the United States must therefore be avoided.¹⁴ State Councillor Dai Bingguo's well-known article in December 2010 was the first clear signal to reassure the U.S. of China's traditional attitude towards world affairs China's attitude on these matters.¹⁵ In January 2011, this message was strongly reiterated by President Hu Jintao as part of his state visit to Washington.¹⁶

Second, China was reminded that, alongside a reassurance policy to Washington, it must send clear signals on matters of maritime security. This was necessary, from China's standpoint, to establish equal relations with the United States. For example, when then Vice President Xi Jinping visited the United States in February 2012, he formally called for building a new type of Great Power relationship. Specifically, he argued that the Pacific Ocean was vast enough to accommodate both China and the United States.

Chinese Strategy: Building a New Great Power Relationship over the U.S.-Japan Alliance

For China, building a new type of Great Power relationship with the U.S. requires two core pillars: equality and avoidance of confrontation.¹⁷ This agenda for repositioning Sino-U.S. relations has in fact framed China's perception of the U.S.-Japanese alliance and of the *Diaoyu/Senkaku* island dispute.

¹⁰ Wu Huaizhong, "Xinfangwei Dagang yu Riben Anquanzhengce Zouxian [Japan's New National Defense Program Outline and The Future of Japan's Security Policy]," *Riben Xuekan* [Japan Studies Journal], No. 1 2011, p.39.

¹¹ Premier Wen Jiabao made his strong opposition towards Japan on the issue in his visit to the US.

¹² Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), p.104-105.

¹³ Similarly, Japan reflected more upon its relations with the US than on those with China.

¹⁴ Wang Jisi, "Shijiezhengzhi Bianqian yu Zhongguoduiwai Zhanlue Sikao [The Changes of World Politics and Considerations on China's International Strategy]," *Zhongguo Guojizhanlue Pinglun* [China International Strategy Review], Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe, 2011, p.10. Cui Tiankai and Pang Hanzhao, *Xinshiqi Zhongguo Waijiao Quanjuzhong de Zhongmeiguanxi* [Sino-US Relations in China's New Era Overall Diplomacy], *Zhongguo Guojizhanlue Pinglun* [China International Strategy Review], Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe, 2012, p.1. He Yafei, "Dui Quanjuzhili de Yixiesikao [Some Thoughts on the Global Governance]," *Zhongguo Guojizhanlue Pinglun* [China International Strategy Review], Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe, 2013, p.12.

¹⁵ Dai Bingguo, "Adhere to the Path of Peaceful Development," December 6, 2012. http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2010-12/06/content_1760381.htm.

¹⁶ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), p.505.

¹⁷ For the evolution of the concept of the new type of great power relations, please refer to Yang Jiemian, Shao Yuqun and Wu Chunsi, "Co-Exploring and Co-Evolving: Constructing a New Model of Major Power Relationship between China and the U.S.," *Global View*, Fall 2013, Shanghai Institute for International Studies, pp.1-22.

Strategically speaking, the *Diaoyu/Senkaku* dispute has replaced Taiwan as the major indicator of U.S. and Chinese strategic intentions. Until 2008, China's main interest in Asian maritime security was focused exclusively on opposing Taiwan's independence. In 2005, when the U.S.-Japanese alliance first included language on Taiwan, China reacted resolutely by passing the Anti-Secession Law and by strongly warning Japan during Hu Jintao's meeting with Junichiro Koizumi in Jakarta. There were also large-scale anti-Japanese demonstrations in China. China's strong signals seemed oriented towards Japan, but the real audience was the United States. This interaction led, in part, to the 2005 repositioning of China as a "responsible stakeholder" in U.S. grand strategy. Since 2008 though, the rapid détente and the *de facto* economic integration between China and Taiwan diluted this conflict as a bellwether of U.S. and Chinese objectives. The decrease of tension across the Taiwan Strait greatly enlarged China's strategic and diplomatic freedom. In the U.S., there was even argument of abandoning Taiwan in favour of securing smoother and more cooperative relations with China.¹⁸ While China has never denied the value of the U.S.-Japan alliance, it never failed to critique the alliance as a tool of containment. For its part, the United States has expressed neutrality on the sovereignty of the *Diaoyu/Senkaku* islands, but confirmed a security commitment to Japan. For China, the role of the United States in this dispute is a guide to America's future stance on Asian strategy. For the U.S., the dispute will test China's basic intentions and capacities on the sea. This is why all of the powers involved have conducted tit-for-tat military exercises. Interestingly, Japan also has reasons to use the dispute as a test of the U.S.-Japan alliance in a period of relative U.S. decline. Therefore, the *Diaoyu/Senkaku* dispute is primarily a strategic game between the United States and China, and secondarily a moderate game between Japan and the United States, and between Japan and China.

Tactically speaking, China sees the *Diaoyu/Senkaku* dispute as a facet of the U.S. island chain strategy, which also incorporates, as a core plank, the Japanese military alliance.¹⁹ China believes that the United States has extended the Cold War strategy of using island chains to contain China's naval and maritime development.²⁰ For this reason, China holds a strong distrust over the United States' "close-in surveillance activities off China's coasts."²¹ The 2001 Sino-U.S. military aircraft clash near Hainan Island highlighted this conflict. With the expansion of regional and global interests, China

¹⁸ Charles Glaser, "Will China's Rise Lead to War?: Why Realism Does Not Mean Pessimism," *Foreign Affairs*, No. 90, No.2 (March/April 2011). Bruce Gilley, "Not So Dire Straits," *Foreign Affairs*, No. 89, No.3 (May/June 2011). For the opposite argument, Nancy Bernkopf Tucker and Bonnie Glaser, "Should the United States Abandon Taiwan?" *The Washington Quarterly*, Fall 2011, Vol.34, No. 4, pp.23-38.

¹⁹ The concept of "island chain" was originally introduced by John Foster Dulles in explaining America's post-War grand security design in the Asia Pacific. John Foster Dulles, "Securing in the Pacific," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 30 No. 2, January 1952, pp.175-187. However, it remains unclear who coined the specific terms of "the first and second islands" despite common perception of China's customary application in her security strategy. Japan's National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS) noted that there was no official definition of island chain by the Chinese government. The NIDS used U.S. Department of Defense definition instead. Boei kenkyuiyo [National Institute for Defense Studies], *Chogoku Ansenhosho Repoto 2011* [China Security Report 2011], February 10, 2012, p.10. China has traditionally viewed it as US containment strategy towards China especially after the Cold War. Liang Fang, *Haishang Tongdao Lun* [On Maritime Strategic Access] (Beijing, Shishi Chubanshe, 2011), pp. 92-94. James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara of the U.S. Naval War College also argues that the first island chain serves as a "Great War in Reverse" to monitor and possibly block China's access to the Pacific Ocean. Cited from, Robert D. Kaplan, "The Geography of Chinese Power," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2010), p.33.

²⁰ Qian Lihua, "Ribei Xuxiguan Zhongguohaijun Yuanyang Xunlian [Japan should be used to China's naval far sea exercises]," *Renmin Ribao* (overseas version), October 21, 2012.

²¹ Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust*, John L. Thornton China Center Monograph Series, Number 4, March 2012, viii.

has become more impatient with America's hegemonic maritime strategy in the western Pacific, particular in the so-called 'first island chain.' For military analysts, the *Diaoyu/Senkaku* islands are located between the first island chain, Taiwan, and the mainland, and would offer China blue sea access.²² With this in mind, the U.S. development of an Air Sea Battle concept has further deepened China's insecurity.²³

On the other hand, the United States has been showing its intention to shift some of its military presence from the first to second island chain (including Guam, Oceania and the Pacific islands). The United States and Japan reached an agreement in May 2006 that 8,000 U.S. Marines and their 9,000 affiliates would be moved from Okinawa to Guam.²⁴ The marine Corps is considered to capable of responding to various crises because it combines the combat power of the army, navy and air force. The shift of almost half of all Marines in Japan to Guam gave some indication of the shifting U.S. military presence in the Asia Pacific region. The advancement of China's missile and air operations have "expanded China's ability to operate outside of its borders and reach U.S. regional allies, such as Japan", and "endangering U.S. forces bases."²⁵ Former Japanese Defence Minister Morimoto Satoshi analysed that the United States would like to "enhance the deterrence" by "shifting the marines to the southern part of the Western Pacific".²⁶ Recent manifestation of this strategy is the rotational deployment of Marines and aircraft to Australia.²⁷ It is also considered to be "less provocative for the United States to keep bases in Oceania in the future than it has for it to keep troops in Japan, South Korea and the Philippines."²⁸ It means to provide a cushion between China and the United States to avoid direct conflict. Meanwhile, America's new strategy in the Asia Pacific seems to emphasise more the significance of Oceania and the Indian Ocean.²⁹ Secretary Clinton clearly defined the new geographic definition of the Asia Pacific region, which "spans two oceans—the Pacific and the Indian—that are increasingly linked by shipping and strategy."³⁰ Robert Kaplan analysed a new Pentagon's plan as "de-emphasising the importance of existing U.S. bases in Japan and Korea and diversifying the U.S. footprint around Oceania".³¹

Certainly, the aforementioned America's new changes do not intend to sacrifice the first island chain to China. On the contrary, it would more likely expect more territorial assertiveness from its allies, particularly Japan. One Chinese expert from Naval College wrote "If Japan totally controls the

²² Feng Liang, *Zhongguo de Hepingfazhan yu Haishang Anquan Huanjing* [China's Peaceful Development and Maritime Security Environment](Beijing: Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe, 2010), p. 184.

²³ The Spokesman of Ministry of Defense, Geng Yansheng criticized the Air Sea Battle idea as a reflection of Cold War mentality in December 2010. Yang Yi, "Konghai Yitizhan Yu Shijie Chaoliu Beidao Erchi (Air Sea Battle is against World Trend)," *People's Daily*, December 11, 2011.

²⁴ http://www.mod.go.jp/j/approach/zaibeigun/saihen/iten_guam/pdf/gyosetu.pdf, accessed on January 25, 2012. The relocation of marines should be viewed in the broader context of U.S. overseas military transformation. The 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* stressed the shift of the basis of defense planning from a "threat-based" model to a "capabilities-based" model for the future. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, September 30, 2001, p. iv.

²⁵ *Report to Congress of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, November 2010, p.73.

²⁶ Satoshi Morimoto, "Beikoku no Ajia Choshi Seisaku to Nichibei Domei" [America's Pivoting to Asia Policy and Japan-U.S. Alliance], *Kokusai Mondai* [International Issues], No. 609, March 2012, p. 40.

²⁷ Tom Donilon, "America is back in the Pacific and will uphold the rules," *Financial Times*, November 28, 2011.

²⁸ Robert D. Kaplan, "The Geography of Chinese Power," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2010), p.39.

²⁹ For the analysis of the U.S. new security strategy of emphasizing the Oceania and the Indian Ocean, Zhang Yun, America's Return to Asia and US-China Relations, *East Asia Policy*, July 2012, pp:36-45.

³⁰ Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, November 2011.

³¹ Robert D. Kaplan, "The Geography of Chinese Power," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2010), p.40.

surrounding waters near the Diaoyu Islands, Chinese navy's critical access to the East China Sea would be blockaded."³² This is the reason, perhaps, that surveillance activities by the Japanese Self Defence Force have increased in recent years. In all of this, the United States seems to be supportive of Japan's new military activities as a form of compensation for a weakened or constrained U.S. role.³³ In response, China's regular deployment of governmental and naval vessels conveys a strong zero-tolerance of any efforts to fortify a first island chain blockade. In doing so, China has taken historic steps towards undermining the U.S.-dominated island chain.³⁴

Passive Diplomacy and Passive Stability: China's Policy towards Japan

As China has consistently regarded Japan as a dependent junior partner of U.S. power in Asia, it is understandable that China has hitherto neglected the Japanese element in its strategic calculation of trilateral relations. To some extent, it could even be argued that China has outsourced the burden of managing Japan to the United States. However, Japan has its own national interests, which are not identical with American ones. Moreover, a hostile Japan would definitely upset China's strategic interests, economically and politically. Tactically speaking, Chinese would like to remain friendly with Japan and to dilute the anti-China colouring of the U.S.-Japan alliance. Yet, in recent, there has been an obvious absence of proactive Chinese diplomacy towards Japan. For example, it is puzzling that China failed to make overtures to Japan during the recent rule of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which is centre-left politically and more oriented to Asia. This is all the more unfortunate given that China's Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao government was widely believed in Japan to be more amenable to constructive engagement and diplomacy. With this in mind, what explains the logic of China's passivity.

First, China's proactive and accommodative diplomacy towards Japan in the latter part of the 2000s failed to result in a better Sino-Japan relationship, resulting in domestic setbacks. In the 2002-2003 period, there was an unprecedented *Duiri Xinsiwei* [New Thinking towards Japan] debate among China's intellectual elites, who called for a more accommodative and reconciliatory policy towards Japan.³⁵ Although this debate lost its momentum due to strong anti-Japanese sentiments, China's policy towards Japan actually followed the basic line of these debates in the years that followed. In his speech in Japan's Diet in 2007, then Premier Wen Jiabao lavishly praised "Japan's post-war peaceful development and [the] Japanese government's repeated apologies over its brutal past."³⁶ China and Japan agreed in principle to jointly develop the gas resources of the East China Sea after then-

³² Feng Liang, *Zhongguo de Hepingfazhan yu Haishang Anquan Huanjing* [China's Peaceful Development and Maritime Security Environment] (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe, 2010), p. 184.

³³ Admiral Samuel J. Locklear III, Commander, U.S. Pacific Command expressed his indirect support over Japan's warplanes and warships surveillance on China's live naval drill. Asia-Pacific U.S. Security Overview, Washington Foreign Press Center, U.S. Department of State, 5 Nov. 2013.

³⁴ Some even argues that it is a qualitative change of China's maritime policy. Zhang Jie, Huangyandao Duizhi yu Zhongguohaishanganquan Zhengce Zhuanxiang, [Huangyan Island Confrontation and China's Maritime Security Policy Transformation], Zhang Jie (eds), *Zhongguo Zhoubian Anquan Xingshi Pinggu 2013* [China's Regional Security Environment Review: 2013], Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2013, pp.54-56.

³⁵ For the latest reflection of the debate, "*Shin Tainichi Shinshiko no Kanosei* [The Possibility of the New "New Thinking on Japan"]", Gaiko, Vol 21, September 2013, pp.16-56.

³⁶ Wen Jiabao, Speech at Japan's Diet, April 12, 2007, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2007-04/12/content_5968135.htm, accessed on Dec. 26, 2013.

President Hu Jintao's visit to Japan in 2008. It might be difficult, then, to expect any Chinese leaders to embrace more accommodative attitudes than those of 2007-2008. However, the slow response of Japan to Chinese pro-activeness, and then the Fishing Boat incident in particular, made the aforementioned policy difficult to maintain on the Chinese side.³⁷

Second, China harboured uncertainty towards the DPJ government's internal solidarity and its ability to engage in creative diplomacy. After the DPJ won a landslide victory in 2009, Yukio Hatoyama proposed an equal relationship with the United States and East Asia Community based on Sino-Japan cooperation. Rather than showing immediate interest, China basically took a 'wait and see' attitude.³⁸ It expressed cautious support towards Hatoyama's proposal of building America-free East Asia Community.³⁹ Predictably, both the United States and the opposition party in Japan were provoked by the DPJ's agenda. The United States was astonished and annoyed by Hatoyama's idea.⁴⁰ Japan's domestic split on the question of a royal audience for China's then Vice President Xi Jinping in late 2009 further revealed the absence of a national consensus in Japan for a new relationship with China.⁴¹ This incident not only cast a shadow on China's future top leader's visit to Japan visit but also underscored the risk of falling victim to Japan's internal political contests.⁴² Around the end of 2009, China seemed to conclude that the DPJ's new stance on the trilateral relations were more rhetorical and unsustainable.⁴³ This conclusion further deterred China from responding proactively to Japan.

Third, Japan's dramatic *Youqinghua* (rightist turn) began to dominate the public discourse of China's relationship with Japan. Japan's unusual practice in dealing with the 2010 incident raised questions of changing Japanese political practices.⁴⁴ China's Japan experts and pundits largely attributed the Japanese decisions to the overall conservative and rightist turn in Japan.⁴⁵ Shinzo Abe's historical revisionist tendency seemed to provide further evidence of *Youqinghua*.

Thus, China's failure to engage in proactive diplomacy towards Japan, Japan's domestic split on dealing with China, and China's perception of a dramatic, rightist turn in Japan, combined to discourage a new bilateral relationship. From China's standpoint, it seemed unproductive to engage in

³⁷ Yang Zewei, "Gezhi Zhengyi Gongtong Kaifa Yuanze: Kunjing yu Chulu [Putting Aside the Dispute and Joint Development: Dilemma and Way Out]," South China Sea Issue Research Council, *Nanhai Quyuwenti Yanjiu* [South China Sea Issue Research] (Beijing: Zhongguo Jingji Chubanshe, 2012), pp.49-50.

³⁸ Some Japanese experts blamed China's less positive response to Hatoyama's new diplomacy as undermining his reputation. Author's talk with a senior Japanese international relations scholar, October, 2013.

³⁹ Wen Jiabao, "Dongya Gongtongti Bukeneng Yicuerjiu [It Is Impossible to Realize East Asia Community Overnight]," *Diyi Caijing Ribao*, October 26, 2009.

⁴⁰ Jeffrey A. Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider's Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012), p.43-45.

⁴¹ The arrangement of the royal audience with Xi Jinping by the Hatoyama cabinet was severely criticized by some Japanese officials, politicians and media as a special treatment of violating the normal protocol procedure and involving political use of emperor.

⁴² "China Japan builds ties amid dispute," *China Daily*, Nov. 15, 2009.

⁴³ Lin Xiaoguang, "Lun Riben Minzhudang de Waijiaozhengce [A Study on Japan's DPJ Diplomacy]," *Riben Xuekan* [Japan Studies Journal], No.4 2009, pp: 24-27.

⁴⁴ In the past, Japan usually deported the fishermen rather than arrestment.

⁴⁵ Liu Jiangyong, *Lundiaoyudao Wenti yu Riben Fangweijihuadagang de Yingxiang* [The Diaoyu Issue and the Implications of Japan's National Defense Program Outline], *Riben Xuekan* [Japan Studies Journal], No.1 2011, p:9. Wu Jinan, "Ribei Minzhudang Waijiaozhengce Tiaozheng de Dongyin yu Zhanwang [The Reasons and Prospect of the Adjustment of the DPJ's Diplomatic Policy]," *Guoji Guanzha* [International Review], No. 6 2010, pp: 2-4.

proactive diplomacy is Japan was not ready for such a strategic shift. Furthermore, with Japan remaining deeply dependent on the United States, Sino-Japan relations would not be out of control as long as Sino-U.S. relations are managed well. Hence, China's has sought a model of "passive structural stability" as a second best option for dealing with Japan.⁴⁶ China's increasing nationalism has also fostered a politics of caution and further encouraged a passive diplomacy towards Japan.

Assessing the Effectiveness of China's Handling with the Dispute

Given the short time span and the paucity of hard evidence, it is difficult at this time to offer a comprehensive assessment of Chinese practices with respect to the *Diaoyu/Senkaku* dispute. The effectiveness of Chinese decisions also varies depending on perspectives and definitions. That is why we are currently witnessing different interpretations of the issue. This policy brief argues that any assessment of Chinese policy should be based on both immediate and longer-term implications.

In terms of the former, China's assertiveness has led to a stronger Japan-U.S. alliance, a more active and autonomous military build-up of Japan, and spill-over concerns from other ASEAN countries.⁴⁷ For instance, China's recent establishment of the Air-Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea has been negatively assessed by many experts outside of China.⁴⁸ For some, the assertive stance of China has helped to rationalise the U.S. pivot to Asia and to further deepen U.S. military alliances in the region.⁴⁹ As a result, China's assertiveness has harmed Chinese interests, in particular, by bringing uncertainties and uneasiness to the region. In this sense, it is possible to conclude that China's assertiveness has been ineffective and dangerous. However, this perspective mostly ignores how China defines effectiveness in the long term.

China should of course be fully aware of the immediate, regional implications of its actions. But why did China behave in an assertive way? China strongly believes that a more equal relationship with the United States cannot be obtained by passively waiting for a U.S. policy shift from primacy to equality. In the post-Cold War period, China has learned that Sino-U.S. tensions – and even temporary confrontations – have upgraded the mutual positioning of bilateral ties. The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1995-1996 did bring about confrontation but also reminded the U.S. of China's strong resolve on the Taiwan issue and changed America's previous policy towards China.⁵⁰ Likewise, the Anti-Secession

⁴⁶ Interestingly, the Japanese strategists thought in a similar way by locking in the Japan-US alliance and "de fault stability" of Sino-Japan relations could be automatically expected. This served the intellectual logic of Junichiro Koizumi's almost ignorant China policy during his tenure. The logic of Japanese side deserves a separate careful analysis. Yoshinobu Yamamoto, "Gurobaru Shisutemu naka no Nicho" [Japan and China in Global System], Kazuko Mori and Zhang Yunlin, *Nicho Kankei o Do Kochiku Suruka* [How to Construct Sino-Japan Relations-For the Coexistence and Cooperation in Asia], Iwanami Shoten, March 25, 2004, p.142, 165.

⁴⁷ Dylan Loh Ming Hui, China's ADIZ over East China Sea: Implications for ASEAN, RSIS Commentaries No. 232/2013, December 19, 2013. "Fears grow of accidental conflict, disputed islands China risks undermining offensive elsewhere in region," *Financial Times*, November 28, 2013.

⁴⁸ Richard A. Bitzinger, "China's ADIZ: South China Sea Next?," No. 219/2013, RSIS Commentaries No. 219/2013, December 2, 2013. The author criticized it as a diplomatic disaster for China. "China zone could cool its ties with Seoul," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 27, 2013. "An irresponsible game in the Pacific," *Financial Times*, November 26, 2013.

⁴⁹ Victor D. Cha, "The opportunity for the US in China's overreach," *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2013.

⁵⁰ James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, From Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1998). Tao Wenzhao, *Lengzhanhou Meiguo Duihua Zhengce* [US Policy towards China after the Cold War] (Chongqing, Chongqing Publishing House, 2006), pp.92-103.

Law provoked U.S. criticism but also accelerated the process of internal consensus building of how to deal with a rising China. Moreover, the U.S. designation of China as a “responsible stakeholder” in 2005 paved the foundation for stable Sino-U.S. relations in the years that followed.

With this in mind, China believes that a clear stance on core issues of national security will be particularly helpful in reducing mutual miscalculations.⁵¹ By way of contrast, vague signals or slow responses might exacerbate a tense situation and enhance mutual distrust in the long term. China knows very well that its space for strategic freedom in the U.S.-Sino relationship is an outcome of both assertiveness and cooperation. Therefore China should not be afraid of the United States but also refrain from unnecessarily offending the United States.⁵² China's perspective on the implications of its decisions might therefore be largely different from that of other countries. In this sense, a more assertive China does not necessarily bring about negative results for regional security.⁵³ China's bumpy but steady development of equal ties with the United States has been a process of “strategic mutual assessment and positioning” through “periods of mutual adaptation” (*Moheqi*).⁵⁴

Concluding Remarks

China's handling with the *Diaoyu/Senkaku* dispute in recent years has been part and parcel of building a new Great Power relationship with the United States. In this dispute, China's main attention has been not on Japan, but on the United States as the independent variable in trilateral relations. As China does yet not have direct influence on Japan, China seeks to pursue a passive structural stability with Japan by focusing on the Sino-U.S. relations.

Strategically speaking, it might be smart and cost-effective for China to concentrate its resources on the Sino-U.S. relationship. But tactically, this less-balanced approach runs the risk of damaging China's soft power. China's strong official statements and resolute reactions may alienate the Japanese public and affect China's image in a negative way.⁵⁵ China would thus succeed strategically, but might also pay the price of losing a favourable regional position in the future. In this sense, it would be of China's interest to be more sensitive to the reactions of the public opinion in Japan and other Asian nations and to invest more in public diplomacy. China's endeavour of establishing the new type of Great Power relation with the US should avoid the unconscious cost of losing a favourable regional public opinion.

⁵¹ Xia Liping, Guanyu Zhongmei Weijiguanli de Bijiaoyanjiu [A Comparative Study on Sino-US Crisis Management], Zhang Tuosheng and Shi Wen (eds.), *Zhongmei Anquan Weiji Guanli Anlifenxi* [Sino-American Security Crisis Management Classic Cases] (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2007), p:76.

⁵² Wang Jisi, *Guoji Zhengzhi de Lixing Sikao* [Rational Reflections on International Politics] (Peking University Press, 2006), p.250-251.

⁵³ Thomas J Christensen, “The Advantage of an Assertive China: Responding to Beijing's Abrasive Diplomacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.90, No.2 (March/April, 2011).

⁵⁴ Wang Fan and Ji Feifei, “Zhongmei ruhe Duguo Xinyilun Moheqi” [How China and the US Experience a New Round of Period of Mutual Adaptation], *Renmin Ribao* (overseas version), December 20, 2013.

⁵⁵ Bruce Stokes, “Asia's view of China-mostly wary, but Japan most of all,” *PewResearch Global Attitudes Project*, August 5, 2013.

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