



Deciphering China's Security Intentions in Northeast Asia: The Japanese Debate

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China's growing military capabilities are an increasing source of consternation for Japan. Areas of concern include China's activities in the East China Sea, Beijing's increasing defense budget, and lack of transparency on its military capabilities. In recent years, Beijing's intensified maritime and aerial activities have been extensively documented and discussed in Japan. This paper examines the perceived "China threat" among Japanese political leaders, the Ministry of Defense (MoD), primary media outlets, and public opinion.

While the two main parties – the leading Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ)¹ – have distinct policy platforms on security challenges posed by China, there are shared concerns over China's intensified activities in the maritime and aerial domains in the region. Analysis of the MoD's 2015 defense white paper reveals Tokyo's concerns over China's increasing defense budget and lack of transparency on its military capabilities. I argue that these expressed concerns are somewhat misplaced and that the real problem is found in the destabilizing nature of China's security policy goals, which have been clearly outlined by Beijing. Analysis of three major daily newspapers, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, and *Asahi Shimbun*, also reveal that issues such as China's military buildup, Beijing's activities in the South China Sea, and new developments in the East China Sea dominate the media debates. While the three provide varying interpretations on the source of the problems and the best way to deal with emerging challenges, issues surrounding the South China Sea are given the most attention in all three. This paper closes with an analysis of recent public polling reflecting Japanese perceptions of China on security issues. Japanese citizens are neither optimistic nor pessimistic about the Sino-Japanese relationship. While their perception about the Sino-Japanese relationship slightly improved in 2015, a plurality thinks that the tense relationship will remain in the foreseeable future.

POLITICAL LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS

The government under Prime Minister Abe Shinzo of the LDP is clearly more concerned about China's growing military capabilities and increasingly assertive attitude. This is clear from the two different versions of the National Defense Program Guidelines (NDPG), a basic document for Japan's defense policy – one developed under Prime Minister Kan Naoto of the DPJ in 2010 and the other developed under Abe in 2013. The assessment on China in the 2010 NDPG reads as follows.

China, a growing major power, is beginning to play an important role for regional and global security. On the other hand, China is steadily increasing its defense expenditure. China is widely and rapidly modernizing its military force, mainly its nuclear and missile force as well as navy and air force, and is strengthening its capability for extended-range power projection. In addition, China has been expanding and intensifying its maritime activities in the surrounding waters. These trends, together with insufficient transparency over China's military forces and its security policy, are of concern for the regional and global community.²

Though similar in overall tone, the description in the 2013 version was notably more elaborate and alarming.

As for China, while it is greatly expected to play an active role in a more cooperative manner in the region and the world, it has been continuously increasing its defense expenditures

and has been rapidly reinforcing its military in a wide range of areas. By doing so, China is believed to be making efforts to strengthen its asymmetrical military capabilities to prevent military activity by other countries in the region by denying access and deployment of foreign militaries to its surrounding areas. However, China has not explicitly stated the purposes and goals of the military buildup and therefore has not fully achieved transparency concerning its military and security.

In addition, China is rapidly expanding and intensifying its activities in the maritime and aerial domains in the region including in the East and South China Seas. In particular, China has taken assertive actions with regard to issues of conflicts of interest in the maritime domain, as exemplified by its attempts to change the status quo by coercion. With regard to the seas and airspace around Japan, China has intruded into Japanese territorial waters frequently and violated Japan's airspace. It has engaged in dangerous activities that could trigger unexpected situations, as seen in its unilateral declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone in the East China Sea, infringing on the freedom of overflight above the high seas.

China is also expanding and intensifying its activities in the maritime and aerial domains farther offshore than before. For example, Chinese military vessels and aircraft routinely enter the Pacific Ocean, and are expanding their operational areas, which include areas north of Japan.

As Japan has great concern about these Chinese activities, it will need to pay utmost attention to them, as these activities also raise concerns over regional and global security.³

The ruling LDP's policy agenda paper published in 2014 touched upon various security challenges posed by the rise of China, including challenges to fundamental values such as the rule of law in the East and South China seas, and challenges to Japan's sovereignty over the Senkaku Islands. The LDP's policy agenda paper also extensively discussed different ways to tackle security challenges posed by China. The list included closer policy coordination with regional countries, use of official development assistance for security purposes, enactment of new security legislation, and better public diplomacy.⁴

Compared to the LDP, the DPJ's policy platform was more narrowly focused on the security of Japan in that it discussed the challenges to the Senkaku Islands and the DPJ's commitment to the enactment of a new law on territorial patrols (領域警備法) without addressing region-wide security challenges posed by China. In particular, the DPJ did not address Japan's security roles in the region.⁵

Domestic political imperatives further widened the gap between the LDP and the DPJ. In July 2015, Abe broke his reticence and began publicly discussing security challenges posed by China.⁶ While Abe initially avoided explicit mention of China out of diplomatic considerations, he faced criticism at home for failing to explain the rationale behind the new security legislation debated in the Diet, and subsequently shifted his approach. Paradoxically, opposition critiques of the new security legislation ended up encouraging the Abe administration to discuss the "China threat" more explicitly.

GOVERNMENT VIEWS

China's Security Policy Objectives

In the *Defense of Japan 2015* white paper, the MoD identified the objectives of China's recent military activities as follows:

- a) Defend its territory by stopping hostile actions as far as possible from the Chinese mainland;
- b) Deter and prevent the independence of Taiwan;
- c) Weaken the control of other countries over the islands to which China claims territorial sovereignty while strengthening the claim of its territorial sovereignty;
- d) Expand, maintain, and protect its maritime rights and interests, especially those in the East China Sea and South China Sea;
- e) Defend the sea lanes of communications not only in its neighborhood but also beyond the waters near China.⁷

According to the MoD, China continued to act in an assertive manner, making coercive attempts at changing the status quo, with claims inconsistent with the existing international legal order. The MoD argued that China's attempt to fulfill its unilateral demands without compromise could produce dangerous unintended consequences and is raising concerns over its future direction.⁸ Yet, the MoD pointed out that China had demonstrated interest in creating crisis prevention mechanisms in recent years. For example, China, together with other countries such as Japan and the United States, agreed to the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) in April 2014 and agreed with Japan to resume consultations on the implementation of the Maritime and Air Communication Mechanism in September 2014. (This mechanism, however, has not become operational as of February 2016.)⁹

Situation in the East China Sea

The MoD paid significant attention to China's activities in the East China Sea. It discussed intermittent intrusions into Japan's territorial waters and airspace by Chinese vessels and aircraft. China also undertook dangerous actions that could cause unintended consequences such as a Chinese vessel's direction of fire control radar at a Self-Defense Forces (SDF) destroyer and the flight of Chinese fighters excessively close to SDF aircraft. The MoD regarded these actions as highly dangerous and urged China to abide by international rules.¹⁰

With regard to the Senkaku Islands, the MoD pointed out that the operations of China's government vessels entering Japan's territorial waters had become regularized since October 2013, suggesting a possibility that an operations manual or other codes had been developed. Moreover, China deployed larger ships in the waters near the Senkaku Islands. In February 2015, three Chinese ships with a displacement of over 3,000 tons entered Japan's territorial waters simultaneously for the first time. China was also constructing the world's largest patrol ship with a displacement of over 10,000 tons.¹¹

In terms of military development, the MoD expressed its concern about China's decision to establish the East China Sea Joint Operational Command Center as its purpose seemed to

have been to jointly enable the Chinese navy and air force to enforce the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone that China unilaterally set up in 2013.¹² Finally, in July 2015, the Japanese government revealed that China had constructed 12 new offshore drilling rigs in the area since June 2013, suggesting that it might use these facilities for military purposes such as deploying radars and/or helicopters for surveillance and reconnaissance operations.

Situation in the South China Sea

The MoD showed significant interest in the situation surrounding the South China Sea, asserting that China had been intensifying its activities there and that Chinese vessels and aircraft had taken potentially dangerous actions vis-a-vis U.S. ships and aircraft. It also called attention to the fact that Chinese naval vessels had fired warning shots at fishing boats of neighboring countries.

In terms of large-scale land reclamation that China had undertaken, the MoD noted that the ongoing construction of runways and ports on the reclaimed lands had raised concerns within the international community.¹³ In addition, the MoD published a short intelligence analysis and data report on China's activities in the South China Sea using photos and tables in July 2015 and released an updated version in December. Besides discussing the details of China's reclamation activities, it also included the history of how China expanded its control in the South China Sea, including some of its attempts to do so by force. The report concluded that the port facilities on the reclaimed lands would have a major impact on the countries in the region and sea lanes there, and that the runway and support facilities on the Fiery Cross Reef would enable China to forward-deploy various aerial platforms such as fighters, bombers, and unmanned aerial vehicles, resulting in improved air power-projection capability, enhanced air superiority, improved denial capabilities against the U.S., and possible declaration of an air defense identification zone in the South China Sea.¹⁴

Regarding the SDF's possible role in the South China Sea, ADM Kawano Katsutoshi, chief of the SDF Joint Staff, said in July 2015 that it was "possible" for the SDF to conduct patrols and surveillance activities there in the future, including anti-submarine operations. That said, he explained that the government would consider this "a potential future issue" to be considered depending on how things turned out.¹⁵

In addition, the MoD noted that Chinese naval vessels had started operating in the Indian Ocean. For example, the Chinese navy's Shang-class nuclear submarine reportedly operated in the Indian Ocean from late 2013 to early 2014, and a Song-class submarine did the same from September to October 2014.¹⁶

Dangerous Military Actions

The MoD took reckless military actions by Chinese sailors and pilots very seriously for three reasons: first, because they might result in dire crises; second, because the Chinese government failed to acknowledge the occurrence of many of these actions and even made claims contrary to the truth; and third, because civilian/party control over the PLA sometimes appeared to be lax. The MoD identified some of the most serious recent actions. First, a Chinese naval vessel locked its fire-control radar on a SDF destroyer in January 2013 – an action tantamount to pointing a gun at someone's forehead without pulling the trigger. After the incident, both the Chinese Ministry of National Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied the use of the radar. Second, Chinese jet fighters flew excessively close to an SDF

aircraft in May and June 2014. Again, the Chinese Ministry of National Defense claimed that Japanese aircraft had entered the airspace that China used for military exercises and conducted dangerous acts. Finally, a Chinese fighter flew excessively close to U.S. military aircraft in August 2014. In this case, the Chinese Ministry of National Defense argued that the Chinese jet kept a safe distance from the U.S. aircraft.¹⁷

The MoD also discussed the possibility that the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party leadership and the PLA had become more “complex” due partly to the professionalization of military issues and diversification of military operations. If true, the implications for crisis management would be extremely important.¹⁸

Cross-Strait Conflict

Conflict between China and Taiwan would be a nightmare for not only these two but also for the United States and Japan, which would most likely be drawn into it. The MoD reiterated the fact that China still gave priority to the Taiwan issue, and that preventing Taiwan from going independent had been the most important factor for China’s military buildup. As part of such efforts, China developed its “asymmetric military capabilities” to deter U.S. forces from operating effectively in China’s neighborhood.¹⁹

In this context, the MoD highlighted China’s effort to acquire capabilities to attack U.S. aircraft carriers. China’s recent activities in the air indicated this trend. In 2013, a Y-8 early warning aircraft and an H-6 bomber entered the Western Pacific in July and September respectively through the airspace between the Okinawa Main Island and the Miyako Island. In October the same year, two Y-8 early warning aircraft and two H-6 bombers did so on three consecutive days. In 2014, one Y-8 intelligence-gathering aircraft and two H-6 bombers similarly flew to the Western Pacific in March; two Y-8 early warning aircraft, one Y-9 intelligence-gathering aircraft, and two H-6 bombers did so four times in December. Finally, one Y-9 intelligence-gathering aircraft entered the Western Pacific on two consecutive days in February 2015, and two H-6 bombers did the same in May the same year.²⁰

In March 2015, the PLA Air Force announced that its aircraft had conducted the first such exercise in the Western Pacific after flying over the Bashi Channel between Taiwan and the Philippines. In May, the PLA Air Force also announced that its aircraft had conducted the first such exercise in the Western Pacific after flying through the airspace between the Okinawa Main Island and the Miyako Island.²¹

The MoD also mentioned China’s development of anti-ship ballistic missiles. If China acquired conventional ballistic missiles with high targeting accuracy based on the DF-21, it could be used to attack U.S. aircraft carriers in the Western Pacific.²²

The MoD expressed concern that the military balance between China and Taiwan was shifting in favor of China, pointing out that even China’s declared defense budget was roughly 13 times larger than Taiwan’s defense budget in 2014. In other words, the real difference in the defense budgets of China and Taiwan was probably larger than this figure.²³

The MoD also compared characteristics of military capabilities of China and Taiwan. First, while China possessed an overwhelmingly larger army, its amphibious landing capability was limited despite efforts to improve amphibious assault capabilities in recent years. Second, while China had a quantitative edge, Taiwan still maintained a qualitative

advantage in terms of naval and air forces. China was also making efforts to catch up with Taiwan in this respect. Finally, while Taiwan was strengthening its ballistic missile defense capabilities, as seen in its upgrading of the Patriot PAC-2 to PAC-3, China deployed a large number of short-range ballistic missiles and other assets aimed at Taiwan, enough to overwhelm Taiwan's air defense.²⁴

Growing Defense Expenditures and the Lack of Transparency

The Japanese government has emphasized the growing size of China's defense budget and its lack of transparency as a sign of an emerging Chinese threat, as in the 2015 defense white paper, which estimated the growth rate to be approximately 10.1 percent and argued that China's defense budget continued to increase at a rapid pace, "recording double-digit annual growth nearly consistently from FY1989 to the present." It also stated that the nominal size of China's defense budget had grown by 4,100 percent in the past 27 years and by 360 percent in the past decade.²⁵

This argument was, however, somewhat overblown. First, the growth rate was calculated in nominal terms instead of real terms. Second, the high growth rate indicated not only the rapid military buildup in recent years but also the extremely low level of defense expenditure in China in the 1980s. Third, while the MoD estimated the growth rate based on China's declared defense budget, it strongly suggested that China's declared defense budget did not include a large number of defense-related expenditures and was, therefore, not reliable. As partial evidence for this, the MoD cited a report released by the U.S. Department of Defense, which contended that China's real defense expenditure amounted to at least \$165 billion in FY2014. According to the report, the declared budget size was \$136 billion, which did not include international arms procurement and R&D.²⁶ The data prepared by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute seems to be more reliable. It estimated real defense expenditure to be \$216 billion in 2014 and the growth rate in the past decade to be 167 percent.²⁷

The MoD also took fault with China's failure to provide information on its weapon systems, procurement goals, organization and locations of major units, major military operations and exercises, and a breakdown of the national defense budget. China did not clarify the goals of its military buildup or decision-making process on security affairs.²⁸ Again, these criticisms seem to be only half true. While it is true that China failed to provide detailed information on its armed forces and that its policymaking process is not transparent, China has been quite vocal and transparent when it comes to the goals of its security policy. It has clearly stated that it would use force if Taiwan declared independence; it has established the air defense identification zone in the East China Sea and expressed the intention to enforce it; and it has clarified its intention to use reclaimed lands in the South China Sea for military purposes. The problem here is not the lack of transparency but the destabilizing nature of the security policy goals, which Beijing has clearly stated.

MEDIA VIEWS

How to understand the implications and security consequences of China's rise has become one of the most important topics of debate in the Japanese media. In this section, I analyze editorials on the issues related to China's security policy in the past one year in three major daily newspapers in Japan – *Yomiuri Shimbun*, *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, and *Asahi Shimbun* – in order to discern their focus, logic, and views. These papers were selected because *Yomiuri*

and *Asahi* are the top two papers in circulation and represent conservative and liberal views respectively. *Nikkei* was selected because it is the most important paper representing business interests in Japan.

Investigation of the editorials of these papers has revealed that China's military buildup, its activities in the South China Sea, and new developments in the East China Sea dominated the discussions, with all three giving the most attention to the South China Sea issue. These three papers, however, provided different interpretations of how to see the sources of the problems and how best to deal with the emerging challenges.

China's Intentions

Yomiuri regarded President Xi Jinping as the dominant actor in the decision-making process and, therefore, the most important source of the problems. It identified Xi's strong desire to turn China into a "great power" as the most important driving force behind China's actions,²⁹ arguing that the "checks and balances" in China's traditional collective leadership were crumbling and expressing concern that Xi might lead China in the wrong direction as some of its leaders did in the past. According to the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Xi failed to address the concerns of the international community, including China's significantly increased defense spending and the way it overlooked the call for democratization in Hong Kong.³⁰ Under the strong leadership of Xi, China is using anti-Japanese sentiment to undermine Japan and strengthening its military capabilities to exclude the United States from Asia. Thus, *Yomiuri* argued that China had to play by international rules and that strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance and multinational security partnerships in the region was the most important basis on which to make such demands of China.

Nikkei was more sanguine about Xi, attributing his tough stance on Japan to the "hardliners" in China, particularly those in the military. When it talks about Chinese policy, "China" is the subject, an interesting contrast to *Yomiuri*, which often uses "Xi" as the subject. The *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* suggested that Xi might have misunderstood the nature of Japan's new security legislation enacted in 2015 and proposed that Abe meet him to explain the peace-inducing nature of the legislation.³¹ While "mindful" of Xi's remarks, "There is enough space in the large Pacific Ocean to accommodate two great powers – China and the U.S.," *Nikkei* avoided being very critical about China's intentions in the South China Sea.³² Similarly, *Asahi* treated Xi's role as secondary, stating that "Xi Jinping's government" is responsible and avoiding identifying Xi himself as the source of the problem.³³

Military Buildup

The *Yomiuri Shimbun* extensively covered China's military buildup with at least seven editorials in the past year on the topic. It expressed concern that China was spending more than three times as much on defense as Japan, that China's 2015 defense white paper discussed "preparations for military struggle at sea,"³⁴ and that China's military modernization was undercutting the technological edge that the United States had enjoyed.³⁵ It also regretted that transparency on China's defense policy has diminished. For example, the 2015 defense white paper did not carry some of the data, such as the number of troops, that the previous ones did, let alone the breakdown into China's nuclear, naval, and air forces.³⁶

Yomiuri also expressed concern that China is boosting its military capabilities without reservation.³⁷ In September 2015, China demonstrated its new intercontinental ballistic

missiles capable of reaching the continental United States for the first time in the military parade near Tiananmen Square. In this context, Xi turned a blind eye to the role that the United States played in the Pacific War.³⁸ *Yomiuri* characterized the military structural reform that China decided to undertake as a “new phase in Xi Jinping’s strong army policy” aimed at effectively executing an A2/AD strategy against the United States. Part of the structural reform was a plan to reorganize the army’s seven major military districts into four to five operational districts, followed by a measure to establish a joint operational command organization in each district. *Yomiuri Shimbun* contended that this would not have been possible without Xi’s initiative because it will undermine parochial interests in the army. It indicated that Xi had consolidated his position over the PLA by purging potential opponents inside the organization. It was noted, however, that it would not be easy for the PLA to start operating jointly. This was not easy for U.S. forces; it has not been easy for the SDF.³⁹

Yomiuri discussed China’s increasingly visible attempt to drive the United States out of Asia and establish China’s hegemony there, as exemplified by: China’s intention to construct aircraft carriers and possess three carrier battle groups by 2020; the renaming of the Second Artillery the “Rocket Forces”; and the establishment of the “Strategic Support Force” in charge of cyber and space warfare.⁴⁰

While *Nikkei* did not run editorials mainly focused on China’s military buildup, it pointed out that China’s defense spending had been growing annually by over 10 percent in the past five years, and its size was now more than three times as large as Japan’s defense budget. The paper expressed concern specifically about China’s naval and air force buildup with its implications for the dispute over the Senkaku Islands.⁴¹

Asahi devoted two editorials to the issue, lamenting that China had decided to significantly increase defense spending to more than three times as large as Japan’s, without enhancing the transparency of its contents. It was understandable that China needed minimum necessary forces for defense purposes, but China’s military power is clearly above the level needed for defense. Growing aircraft carrier and nuclear forces together with the development of anti-satellite weapons were the cases in point.⁴²

Asahi Shimbun was also critical of China’s decision to reduce its 2.3 million troops by 300,000, arguing that it was merely part of the broader effort to modernize the PLA and divert resources away from the army to the navy and air force. It speculated that Xi might have decided to organize a military parade in 2015 instead of the more conventional 2019 seventieth anniversary of the establishment of the PRC in order to consolidate his authority over China’s massive armed forces.⁴³ *Asahi*’s more progressive inclination was visible when it pointed out the danger of an arms race and inadvertent escalation. It expressed concern that Southeast Asian countries were strengthening their naval forces in response to China’s military buildup, and that actions by the United States could also increase tension.⁴⁴

South China Sea

Given the rising tension in the South China Sea in 2015, China’s actions became the most important topic. *Yomiuri* was most vocal again, running at least six editorials devoted mainly to the topic, arguing that what stood out was China’s boldness in revealing its military-diplomatic intentions in the area. ADM Sun Jianguo, deputy chief of the PLA General Staff Department, not only claimed sovereignty over the reclaimed lands in the South China Sea

but also declared that the reclamation efforts were done for military purposes. *Yomiuri* saw this as an effort to turn the South China Sea into a “Chinese sea” and keep the United States out of the area.⁴⁵

Yomiuri also argued that China was using *fait accompli* tactics by physically strengthening its presence and control in the South China Sea while engaging in dialogue with the ASEAN member countries. It inferred that China’s decision to conduct large-scale military exercises in the South China Sea one day before the China-ASEAN dialogue was to “warn” the United States, which had stepped up its patrol and surveillance activities in the area.⁴⁶

Yomiuri Shimbun called for countries in the region to demand that China stop unilaterally challenging the status quo through force, intimidation, or coercion. In this context, it welcomed the decision made by the Permanent Court of Arbitration under the United Nations that it had jurisdiction to hear some territorial claims the Philippines had filed against China over disputed areas in the South China Sea. At the same time, the paper applauded the military-to-military dialogue that the United States had with China, which would help the two countries avoid inadvertent clashes at sea or in the air.⁴⁷

Nikkei faulted China’s actions in the South China Sea as highly destabilizing, emphasizing possible negative consequences to the region’s economic growth.⁴⁸ It ran two editorials on this issue within just five days, stressing the importance of secure sea lines of communications for international trade. They criticized China’s assertion that the reclamation in the South China Sea was undertaken for military purposes and denounced the way its defense white paper spoke of its “military struggle at sea.” The *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* called for Japan and the United States to invite the countries in the region to expand the scope of security cooperation and to help strengthen their ability to effectively police and patrol in the area.⁴⁹ It also warned that the tension in the South China Sea would affect the world and a clash between the United States and China would have dire consequences for the world economy.⁵⁰ *Nikkei* lamented the lack of solidarity in ASEAN in the face of China’s divide-and-rule tactics and suggested that economic integration would produce high economic growth only if security was maintained.⁵¹ Again, negative consequences of security problems on the economy were emphasized.

Asahi Shimbun was similarly critical of China’s actions in the South China Sea. It wrote that China was primarily responsible for tensions there,⁵² and it cautioned against the possibility of China taking offensive actions based on its idiosyncratic claim on sovereignty over the South China Sea.⁵³ However, it took a slightly more neutral position between China, on the one hand, and the United States and Japan, on the other, than the other two papers, quoting Admiral Sun’s contention that the reclamation was a “military requirement for defensive purposes” and that the runways would be used militarily and commercially.⁵⁴ It even went so far as to caution the United States to avoid making “unnecessary provocations” when conducting its freedom of navigation operations and to accept China’s argument that the reclaimed islands would be used primarily for “commercial services” as well as China’s overture to ASEAN countries for an agreement on a code of conduct in the South China Sea. Moreover, it also warned against possible involvement of the SDF in the South China Sea and the application of the new security legislation to contingencies there.⁵⁵ *Asahi* was sympathetic to Taiwan’s proposal to set aside sovereignty issues and undertake joint development of natural resources with China,⁵⁶ while suggesting that bringing Beijing into economic partnerships such as RCEP would be the best solution to the problem.⁵⁷

Senkaku Islands and the East China Sea

There was a less visible but important new development in the East China Sea in 2015. In July, the Japanese government revealed that China had constructed 12 new offshore drilling rigs in the area since June 2013 and suggested that it might use these facilities for military purposes. *Yomiuri Shimbun* speculated that China might become capable of enforcing the air defense identification zone it had established in the East China Sea in 2013 if it deployed radar systems on the rigs.⁵⁸ With regard to the Senkaku Islands, it pointed out that Chinese government ships' operations had become regularized with six to nine vessels entering Japanese territorial waters per month and that China was constructing large coast guard ships including the world's largest, with a displacement of more than 10,000 tons. It highly regarded the Japan coast guard's decision to organize a 12-ship team earmarked for patrolling there, suggesting a possibility that this would become a long-term peacetime competition. While advocating stronger U.S.-Japan security partnership and better public relations efforts to enhance international awareness that the islands belong to Japan, *Yomiuri* also called on Japan and China to realize the early establishment of a crisis prevention mechanism at sea.⁵⁹

The *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* criticized China's move to construct drilling rigs in the East China Sea and demanded that it abide by the Sino-Japanese agreement of 2008, in which the two agreed on joint development of natural gas in the area. Implementation of the agreement had been blocked by hardliners within the Chinese leadership, particularly those in the PLA. *Nikkei* also took issue with the Japanese government for failing to inform the Japanese people of rig construction in the East China Sea earlier, and for doing so only at a time when it needed to bolster public support for the new security legislation.⁶⁰

On the Senkaku issue, *Nikkei* urged heightened vigilance. It interpreted the reduction in frequency of Chinese government vessels entering Japanese territorial waters around the islands (from about eight times a month to two to three times a month after October 2013) not as a sign of good intentions, but as a result of a tactical change through which China is implementing a long-term competition with Japan over the Senkaku Islands. In line with the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* also advocated the strengthening of the Japan coast guard patrolling capacity and establishment of a crisis prevention mechanism between Japan and China.⁶¹

Asahi Shimbun's response to the construction of oil rigs in the East China Sea was quite different from that of the other two papers. It faulted the Japanese government's attempt to use this issue to marshal political support for the new security legislation and its failure to report China's actions in the East China Sea earlier.⁶²

North Korea

Asahi was the only paper that ran an editorial specifically devoted to China's role on the North Korea issue. It blatantly blamed China for becoming a loophole for North Korea to deflect the pressures that the international community had imposed through UN Security Council resolutions and sanctions. It demanded that China take actions that it had failed to take in the past. For a more fundamental improvement of the situation, the *Asahi Shimbun* identified the U.S. commitment as indispensable and advocated engagement with North Korea through frameworks such as the Six-Party Talks.⁶³

Policy Prescriptions

Yomiuri's prescription for the security challenges posed by China was predominantly focused on defensive measures. It expressed support for U.S. freedom of navigation operations, closer U.S.-Japan security cooperation, and strategic partnership with other Asian countries such as Vietnam, welcoming Japan's decision to provide patrol boats to Vietnam.⁶⁴

The *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* emphasized dialogue while expressing support for defensive measures that the countries in the region had been taking.⁶⁵ It expressed understanding of the sense of frustration in China and Russia about the Western-led current international order, and urged Japan, the United States, and European countries to engage more proactively with them to construct a mutually acceptable international order.⁶⁶ It also called for a cautious approach toward China, urging Abe to sincerely explain his position on history and security issues when he met with Xi. Deepening economic interdependence with China was another prescription suggested by *Nikkei*.⁶⁷

Asahi suggested a slightly more cautious approach. It called on China to be more attentive to the international community and for Japan and the United States to be more accommodating to China's growing role in the world.⁶⁸ While supporting U.S. and Japanese efforts to strengthen policy coordination with the countries in the region in order to put diplomatic pressure on China,⁶⁹ it emphasized diplomatic persuasion and peaceful competition.⁷⁰ Recalling that free trade has contributed tremendously to the rise of China and that the freedom and security of the South China Sea were key factors, *Asahi* urged China to remember this especially as its economic growth was slowing.⁷¹

PUBLIC OPINION

This section discusses Japanese public perceptions of China on security issues based on the following public opinion polls, unless otherwise specified:

- Cabinet Office's public opinion poll on the Self-Defense Force and defense issues conducted in January 2015 (hereafter Poll C)⁷²
- *Yomiuri Shimbun*'s Japan-Korea joint opinion poll conducted in May 2015 (hereafter Poll Y1)⁷³
- *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*'s Japan-Korea joint opinion poll conducted in May 2015 (hereafter Poll N)⁷⁴
- Genron NPO's 11th Japan-China Joint Opinion Poll conducted in September 2015 (hereafter Poll G)⁷⁵
- *Yomiuri Shimbun*'s U.S.-Japan joint public opinion poll conducted in November 2015 (hereafter Poll Y2)⁷⁶
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MOFA) public opinion poll on foreign policy conducted from November to December 2015 (hereafter Poll M)⁷⁷

China as a Security Threat

China and North Korea are competing for first place as the most important security concern to Japan. In Poll Y1, 84 percent of respondents regarded China as a military threat, followed by North Korea with 77 percent.⁷⁸ In Poll N, more than 70 percent of Japanese respondents thought China was a threat. In terms of generational breakdown, less than 70 percent of those in their 20s thought that China was a threat; more than 70 percent of any other generation thought it was.⁷⁹ In Poll G, the largest number of Japanese respondents regarded North Korea as a military threat (75 percent), followed by China (68.1 percent). Only 9 percent of the Japanese public “trusted China.”⁸⁰ In the poll conducted jointly by *Sankei* and the *Fuji News Network* in September 2015, 78.9 percent of the respondents answered that China was a threat to the security of Japan while 16.9 percent of them said it was not.⁸¹ In Poll Y2, 88 percent of Japanese respondents said they did not trust China, and 82 percent of them regarded China as a military threat to Japan while 77 percent of them regarded North Korea as a military threat.⁸²

To the less explicitly framed question about the most important factor from the viewpoint of Japan’s peace and security, the largest number of respondents pointed to China’s military modernization and activities at sea (60.5 percent), followed by the situation on the Korean Peninsula (52.7 percent) in Poll C. In fact, these two factors had changed positions from the previous poll conducted in 2012 when the former was chosen by 46 percent and the latter by 64.9 percent respectively.⁸³

Regarding what constituted the “military threat” from China, Chinese vessels’ intrusions into Japan’s territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands was most important (72.5 percent), followed by the existence of disputes over the Senkaku Islands and undersea resources between the two countries (61.7 percent) and powerful Chinese military power (41.3 percent) according to Poll G.⁸⁴

Japanese citizens proved to have a grim view of their country’s future. In Poll C, as many as 75.5 percent of the respondents agreed that Japan could be militarily attacked or drawn into armed conflicts in the future.⁸⁵

Senkaku Islands Issue

Japanese citizens regarded the territorial dispute as the most important obstacle to the development of the Sino-Japanese relationship (56 percent), followed by the lack of trust between the two governments (38.2 percent).⁸⁶ On the question of how to resolve territorial disputes, the largest percentage of Japanese respondents (46.2 percent) called for negotiations while the largest percentage of Chinese respondents (58.2 percent) thought that China should strengthen its effective control over the disputed areas.⁸⁷ About one quarter of Japanese respondents expected a military conflict between Japan and China over the Senkaku issue “in the future” or “in a few years’ time” (26.9 percent) while 38.8 percent of them thought it was not likely and 34.2 percent chose “don’t know” as the answer.⁸⁸

Although the Senkaku Islands issue remained important in generating a sense of threat in the minds of the Japanese people, its impact has declined in the past year. According to Poll G, on the question of “what comes to mind when you think of China,” the largest number of Japanese respondents answered “air pollution” (36.8 percent) and the Senkaku Islands was down to 19.9 percent from 28.6 percent in the previous year, indicating the easing of negative sentiment the Japanese citizens had about the territorial issue.⁸⁹

SDF's Mission

Regarding the SDF's future roles, "securing Japan's seas and airspace, and defending against attacks against its islands" was regarded as the second most important objective (69.9 percent) next to disaster relief operations (72.3 percent) in Poll C.⁹⁰ Moreover, as many as 52.7 percent of respondents answered positively to the possible dispatch of the SDF to the South China Sea while 39.9 percent of them answered negatively, according to the poll conducted in November 2015 by Kyodo News.⁹¹

Future Outlook

Japanese citizens' perceptions of the Sino-Japanese relationship slightly improved in 2015, but they were neither optimistic nor pessimistic about the relationship in the future. According to Poll G, Japanese respondents who regarded the Sino-Japanese relationship as bad had declined from 83.4 percent in the previous year to 71.9 percent in 2015. In terms of future prospects, however, while those who expected deterioration of the bilateral relationship diminished from 36.8 percent last year to 24.7 percent and those who foresaw improvement grew from 8 percent in the previous year to 12.7 percent, the largest number of respondents (42.5 percent) expected the relationship to remain the same.⁹²

Regarding a future power shift, 52 percent of Japanese respondents expected China's political influence to grow in the next 10 years, and 64.2 percent expected China's military influence to become greater in the same period. Despite this, Japanese citizens were less worried about the possibility of Sino-Japanese conflict than their Chinese counterparts. While 71.4 percent of Chinese respondents saw the likelihood or high likelihood of Japan and China engaging in a conflict in the future, only 38.9 percent of Japanese respondents answered similarly, with 39.5 percent saying that a Sino-Japanese war was not likely.⁹³

To the question of which of the two – the United States or China – would become more important to Japan in the future, 73 percent of Japanese respondents said the United States, and only 17 percent said China, according to Poll Y1.⁹⁴ Japanese attitudes toward China and the United States seem to be strongly correlated to their views on the future power balance between the two. According to the Pew Research Center survey conducted from March to May 2015, while majorities or pluralities in 27 of 40 countries said China would eventually become or had already replaced the United States as the top superpower, more than three-quarters of the respondents in Japan said that China would never replace the United States as the top superpower (77 percent) – highest among the countries surveyed. This compares interestingly with the percentage of respondents who said China would eventually become or had already replaced the United States in China (67 percent), Australia (66 percent), South Korea (59 percent) and even the United States (52 percent).⁹⁵ It is not clear how these two are related (instead of correlated), but the Japanese people seem to have an optimistic (possibly wishful) view on the future of the United States partly because that would serve their security interests better.

Despite the perceived importance of the United States over China, Japanese citizens still regard China as an extremely important country. When asked to separately assess the importance of the two to Japan (rather than choose which one was more important to Japan), their responses on both were notably high. As many as 82.3 percent of respondents said the relationship with China was important while 92.2 percent answered that Japan's relationship with the United States was important.⁹⁶

CONCLUSION

As China increases its role in regional and global security, it has also taken assertive actions that Japan perceives as threats to its national interests and security. Across the board, Japanese political leaders, the MoD, major media outlets, and the general public regard China's assertive actions in the maritime domain as most disconcerting. The Japanese government also highlights Beijing's growing defense expenditures and related lack of transparency as a sign of emerging threat. Major media outlets add to the outcry by expressing criticism of China's actions in the East and South China seas, but provide varying interpretations on the source of the problems and best way to deal with emerging challenges in the region. Finally, while public opinion on Sino-Japan relations slightly improved in 2015, Japanese citizens recognize that the relationship will remain difficult in the foreseeable future.

ENDNOTES

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32. *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, May 20, 2015.
33. *Asahi Shimbun*, June 2, 2015.
34. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, May 28, 2015.
35. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, May 14, 2015.
36. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, May 28, 2015.
37. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, September 4, 2015.
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39. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, December 16, 2015.
40. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, January 9, 2016.
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47. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, November 5, 2015.
48. *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, May 20, 2015.
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