

# Japan and the Identity Politics of East Asian Maritime Disputes

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Received: 9 April 2017 / Accepted: 31 May 2017 / Published online: 9 June 2017

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**Abstract** Given the essentially divisive and zero-sum nature of territorial issue, revisionist countries are often tempted to achieve their goals by the use of force rather than by peaceful negotiations. Fueled by identity politics, the aversion of some disputant countries to negotiated settlements is truly worrisome in East Asia. At the regional/structural level, the rise of China poses substantial challenges to U.S. hegemony. China is too big and too proud to comply without reservations with the Western-shaped norms and rules. As to Japan, it is certainly an important agent in the emerging regional order and yet its influence is mixed: On the one hand, it serves as a linchpin of a rules-based co-evolution of regional order; on the other hand, the resurgence of its maritime identity is making the already daunting task of stabilizing the new regional balance of power much more difficult. The combination of Trump and Abe risks may prove to be particularly troublesome. With U.S. President Donald Trump's rise as an unpredictable security partner and China's rise as an unforeseen security challenge, the resurgence of Japan as a sea power under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's leadership causes big uncertainties to a region already in trouble.

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This work was supported by a research grant "Japan and the Emerging Regional Order" and a National Research Foundation of Korea grant funded by the Korean government (NRF-2014S1A3A2044630). Earlier versions of this study were presented at two successive workshops entitled "Japan and the Emerging Regional Order" (Yonsei University, Seoul, October 25, 2016 and February 12, 2017). The author would like to thank T.J. Pempel, Yul Sohn, and anonymous reviewers for their useful comments.

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## Emerging risks at sea

China claims sovereignty and sovereign rights over nearly the entire South China Sea and has strengthened its control over a region where Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam also have claims. More recently, the decades-old South China Sea disputes have caused heated debates about two distinct but related events: (1) China's construction drive to transform the barren reefs and submerged atolls it controls into artificial islands with large airstrips and military facilities; (2) The International Arbitral Tribunal's decision to reject China's comprehensive claims overwhelmingly in favor of the Philippines.

Before China's construction drive drew a global attention in the security circle, the South China Sea disputes had mainly been about marine resources. Claimant countries—China, Vietnam and the Philippines, among others—forcefully arrested or harassed each other's fishermen in the vicinity of disputed islands. In spring 2012, for instance, China and the Philippines were engaged in a tense two-month stand-off in the Scarborough Shoal. The Philippines eventually withdrew its fishing and other vessels, but filed a claim against China seeking arbitration under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In May 2014, the Philippines maritime police arrested eleven Chinese fishermen for illegally fishing and poaching in the waters claimed by Manila. The contest for hydrocarbon potentials is best exemplified by the confrontation between Vietnam and China in the summer of 2014.

Before the Tribunal's decision, a purely 'realist' perspective was dominant *vis-à-vis* the interpretation of the rise of China and its consequences on its neighbors. On 12 July 2016, the International Arbitral Tribunal established pursuant to the UNCLOS issued its award on the arbitration case between the Philippines and China over the South China Sea dispute. In its landmark, unanimous ruling, the Tribunal rejected China's excessive claim in the South China Sea, including the 'nine-dash line' and entitlements to maritime areas, and concluded that the country had violated the Philippines' sovereign rights as well as its obligation to protect the marine environment.<sup>1</sup> China is now also drawn into legal warfare—or lawfare—over the question of if those islands are in fact in international waters and not part of China proper (Koo 2017: 53).

Uncertainties loom even greater than ever with the developments outside the South China Sea. These new developments would spark a furious reaction from China and throw the entire region ties into turmoil.

The first is the so-called Trump risk. The U.S. and China have been waging a new hegemonic competition in the South China Sea for their own core maritime interests. U.S. President

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<sup>1</sup> Five key points made by the tribunal are as follows: (1) There is no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to resources within the 'nine-dash line'; (2) None of the Spratly Islands is capable of generating extended maritime zones and therefore certain sea areas fall within the EEZ of the Philippines without being overlapped by any possible entitlement of China; (3) China has thus violated the Philippines' sovereign rights in its EEZ; (4) By its land reclamation and construction of artificial islands, China has violated its obligation to preserve and protect fragile marine ecosystems; and (5) China's land reclamation and construction activities are incompatible with its obligation not to aggravate the dispute during resolution proceedings (Permanent Court of Arbitration (2016). The South China Sea Arbitration: The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China. Press Release. 12 July, available at <<https://pca-cpa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/175/2016/07/PH-CN-20160712-Press-Release-No-11-English.pdf>> (accessed 12 July 2016)).

Donald Trump has already provoked China by hinting that his administration would take a harder line on the South China Sea. Trump's China policy is likely to back a more muscular military approach, including the stepping-up of freedom of navigation and overflight operations.<sup>2</sup>

The second is the so-called Abe risk. Japan has a longstanding territorial conflict with China in the East China Sea.<sup>3</sup> Although Japan is not an immediate 'shareholder' in the South China Sea disputes, it has increased its activities in the region through joint training patrols with the U.S. and exercises with regional navies. The Shinzo Abe administration is no longer shy about standing tough against China. Upset, China vows to take resolute countermeasures, which are not a recipe for regional peace and stability.

Most contemporary maritime disputes in East Asia persist, while neither reaching peaceful resolutions nor escalating into full-scale militarized conflicts (Koo 2010). Tensions rise and fall in an arena where international, regional, and domestic politics meet. Aside from the hegemonic rivalry between the U.S. and China, the regional rivalry between Japan and China is equally divisive. It is not only about the material values involved in the marine resources, but also about the national identity and pride that lie in the historical context. Especially the identity politics represent a zero sum game in which actors seek to acquire or restore their national pride at the expense of others.

This study examines the new Sino-Japanese rivalry that revolves around their conflictual identity as a regional sea power. It argues that Obama's 'Pivot to (maritime) Asia' policy (and Trump's yet-to-be-named hostile policy) has rejuvenated Japanese traditional identity as a sea power. It has also created the background against which China has been shifting its attention to the China Seas and the Indo-Pacific Ocean, departing from its traditional identity as a land power. Such an action-reaction cycle is likely to create an additional pressure on the regional seas which have already been steamed up in both geopolitical and geoeconomic manners. The rivalry over the seas will redefine the balance of power and interest in the region. Japan's role in this regard will be critically examined.

## **Enduring territorial nationalism**

Disputes over territorial sovereignty and regional influence feed 'territorial nationalism' between China and Japan. It creates conflictual images of national identity. It takes the form of resource nationalism, often worsened by the competitive rivalry and historical animosities. As of today, territorial nationalism in East Asia not only endures but also abounds.

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<sup>2</sup> At his confirmation hearing in January 2017, Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, set the stage for a potentially explosive clash with Beijing by likening its artificial island construction drive to "Russia's taking of Crimea." The Chinese government has warned the U.S. to "speak and act cautiously." Chinese media has also warned that any attempt to prevent China from accessing its interests in the region would risk sparking a "large-scale war" (Phillips 2017).

<sup>3</sup> China and Japan have deepened their bilateral economic relations over the past four decades. Many would agree that a more cooperative relationship with shared economic goals is preferable to the mutual hostility. However, the dispute over the islands Japan calls Senkaku Retto and China calls Diaoyu Dao serves as the major bone of contention. For more details about the East China Sea dispute, see Deans (2000), Koo (2010), and Nakano (2015).

Other things being equal, sovereignty and jurisdiction over materially-valued territory make a country stronger. But at the same time, it makes the country more vulnerable to external threats. It is no coincidence that East Asian maritime disputes have taken the form of resource nationalism relating hydrocarbon potentials and fish stocks near barren offshore rocks and reefs at a time of global shortage of resources. The energy-hungry East Asian countries including Japan and China all have shown keen interest in the potentially huge deposits of oil and gas near disputed islands. The dire energy need has made the rich, untapped energy resources in the East Asian seas an enormously attractive solution. Most coastal countries also rely on disputed areas to supply a large volume of fisheries and seafood products. The escalation of conflict over marine resources is a serious potential hazard that may disrupt the sea-lanes on which billions of people depend for their survival (Koo 2010; Daniels 2014).<sup>4</sup>

Sovereignty and jurisdiction over territory also generates strategic and military values that are critical to national security. In the East Asian context, retaining and sustaining the control over the dispersed rocks and reefs directly affects the control of the critical sea lanes in the enclosed and semi-enclosed seas such as the East and South China Seas. All the trading countries in the region are heavily dependent on the long-haul sea lanes of communication (SLOC) that connect the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean to the East and South China Seas. Even big powers such as China and Japan are vulnerable to a disruption of marine supply lines. The freedom of navigation in the regional seas now has a growing importance for naval strategists (Emmers 2009; Koo 2010; Hayton 2014).

Territory also has relational and social values. For some people, a certain piece of territory is important not only because of its material values but also because of its symbolic significance for their national, ethnic, or religious identities (Tir 2001: 5). Symbolic attachment of territory to national identity and pride makes territorial disputes much more charged both emotionally and politically. In particular, conflicts over sacred space raises the problem of indivisibility, thus making less likely the application of creative solutions such as setting aside sovereignty claims in favor of shared ownership (Newman 1999; Hassner 2003). Inspired by the belief in common ethnicity or prior possession, the perception of indivisibility often leads to an irredentist call to reunite territories even though they currently belong to another country (Suganuma 2000: 3-10).

Many East Asian countries have fought wars on irredentist grounds in the postwar period. As a party to many of the maritime and territorial disputes, China is one of the most notable examples. Since the Sino-Indian border war of 1962, China has shown insatiable irredentist ambitions. From this perspective, China is thought to believe that territory once won for China must forever remain so, and, if lost, must be recovered at the first opportunity “to regain the full territory and standing of the Chinese Empire at its peak” (FitzGerald 1964, cited from Lo 1989: 2).

Chinese irredentism alerts Japanese territorial nationalism. Enduring rivalry is a key characteristic of Sino-Japanese relations. One of the most serious obstacles to reaching mutually agreeable resolutions of their territorial disputes is rivalry perceptions that have persisted over

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<sup>4</sup> In 2008, for instance, Japan and China hammered out a deal to jointly develop and explore marine resources in the East China Sea by overcoming nationalist pressures. However, the agreement sits on a shaky foundation as illustrated by the ongoing stalemates (Zhang 2011).

the past centuries (Deans 1996, 2000; Till 1996; Blanchard 2000). To be sure, China's irredentist ambition increases the possibility of territorial conflicts by aggravating nationalist sentiments in its neighbors. Japan is not the only country that worries about the rise of China, but certainly is one of the most threatened ones by the rise of 'maritime' China. Before Japan was defeated by the U.S. in the Pacific War, it had been the only regional sea power.

Finally, the hegemonic competition between the U.S. and China and the enduring rivalry between China and Japan are a dangerous combination, adding fuel to potential fires. Any miscalculations by these major powers are likely to lead to worsening relations, motivating them to escalate a dispute to higher levels of hostility rather than to accept the territorial status quo (Koo 2010).

## **Hegemonic competition between the U.S. and China**

The rise of China's sea power is a big strategic challenge to everyone in East Asia. China intends to challenge the status quo in maritime Asia, claiming that the sovereignty of disputed islands in the East and South China Seas all belongs to China. China is no longer a land-based power and is now capable of conducting operations beyond its offshore boundaries. The country is re-emerging as a maritime power for the first time since Zheng He made seven unprecedented voyages into the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

China's unreserved ambition for maritime hegemony reflects its 'siege' and 'national humiliation mentality.' After denying for years that it was developing an aircraft carrier, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) launched one in 2012 and has a submarine fleet that can rival U.S. naval supremacy in Asia. The building of airfields and other military installations on the features in the South China Sea will provide China with an additional edge over the U.S. and China's neighbors. China has held naval drills far beyond the so-called first island chain. With the Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy, China will soon become able to reach the so-called second island chain in the western Pacific Ocean without much concern about the U.S. carrier groups (Koo 2017: 55).

China's new naval strategy can be characterized as 'point-line-plane' approach. Beijing has secured its control over scattered islands ('point strategy') over the past two decades and now attempts to connect them with island chains ('line strategy') with a goal to complete its control in the Western Pacific ('plane strategy') (Koo 2016). It remains controversial whether or not China's effort at securing points and lines in the maritime domain is defensive or offensive in nature. China appears to be a security maximizer rather than a power maximizer. China's 'One Belt, One Road' initiative and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road proposal indicate that China desperately needs to secure its peaceful access to the sea lines of communication in order to continue its economic prosperity. On the military front, the A2/AD strategy is inherently defensive in nature. But China is equally likely to exercise its growing power at the expense of its neighbors when necessary.

In response, U.S. strategy toward maritime East Asia has significantly changed over the past decade. In February 2010, the U.S. officially adopted Air-Sea Battle (ASB) as an integrated battle doctrine in Asia. The doctrine was renamed to Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC) in January 2015. Such a shift also reflects America's reaction

to China's emerging 'point-line-plane' strategy. JAM-GC extends ASB by integrating 'maneuver' into 'access.' It is not a coincidence that the U.S. has worked hard to (re-)established its strategic footholds or pivots ('point strategy') in the region including Darwin, Guam, and the Philippines. It is also notable that JAM-GC includes 'the global commons' such as outer space, cyber space, the high seas, and deep seabed. It can be interpreted as an evolution of America's 'plane' strategy.

Especially for the Chinese strategists, the unintended consequence of America's rebalancing to Asia was to alert China's longstanding approach to maritime security. It aggravated Sino-U.S. strategic distrust in the South China Sea and beyond. Some commentators have also noted that America's maritime strategy will change from 'pivot' to 'hammer.'<sup>5</sup> For instance, Dobell (2016) argues "As the Pivot passes, Asia confronts a new President who seems to think all the U.S. needs is a bigger and better hammer." Understandably, many East Asia scholars and analysts worry that President Trump's 'America First' agenda is on a head-on collision course with a rising but unsatisfied China.

For years to come, the hegemonic competition at sea between the U.S. and China will only be intensified rather than alleviated. Such a competition will be played out against the backdrop of large-scale strategic transformation in East Asia, including naval arms race and exchange of hostile rhetoric. Although the first face-to-face meeting between Presidents Donald Trump and Xi Jinping took place in the U.S. in April 2017, it remains unclear how and to what extent the Sino-U.S. relationship will be redefined and reshaped under the Trump administration. Its much-anticipated new Asian strategy was not formally released at the 2017 Shangri-La Dialogue held in Singapore in June 2-4. U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis only sought to reassure Asian allies that the U.S. "will continue to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows, and demonstrate resolve through operational presence in the South China Sea and beyond." He also made it clear that the U.S. "cannot accept Chinese actions that impinge on the interests of the international community, undermining the rules-based order that has benefitted all countries" (U.S. Department of Defense 2017).<sup>6</sup>

## The resurgence of Japanese sea power

Over the past two centuries, the rise and fall of Japanese sea power has been dramatic. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Japan's naval ascendance came at the expense of Chinese and Russian powers in Asia. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, it waged a war in the Pacific against the most powerful navy in the world. Japan's defeat in the Pacific was followed by the fall of its maritime identity

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Maslow said in 1966: "It is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail."

<sup>6</sup> It is also notable that Mattis emphasized a legal approach in dealing with China. He emphasized that U.S. freedom of navigation operations throughout the region "are an expression of our willingness to defend both our interests and the freedoms enshrined in international law." In a similar vein, he maintained that the scope and effect of China's construction of artificial islands differ from those of other countries in several key ways: "the nature of its militarization, China's disregard for international law, its contempt for other nations' interests, and its efforts to dismiss non-adversarial resolution of issues" (U.S. Department of Defense 2017).

and pride. At the turn of the new millennium, however, the rise of territorial nationalism and hegemonic competition between the U.S. and China sets the background against which Japanese sea power is resurging.

Japan is an island country consisting of four main islands and thousands of smaller islands. This geographic context has provided Japan with a unique threat perception: any external threats will always come from the ocean. Lacking natural resources, Japan also has to rely on others overseas for most of the raw materials. For instance, more than 90% of its oil and gas supplies are obtained through the sea lanes stretching from the Gulf of Aden to the Japan proper.

In the past, many Japanese rulers chose to either ignore or suppress Japanese maritime identity, resulting in a long state of isolation and hibernation, most notably from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Western maritime powers, particularly the U.S. forced Japan to reopen sea communications, which led to the demise of Tokugawa Shogunate. In just a few decades after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan developed an ocean-going navy capable of defeating rival sea powers such as China (1894-95) and Russia (1904-05). At the advent of World War I, Japan was recognized as a major sea power. In the Pacific Ocean and East Asia, the Imperial Japanese Navy operated within the Washington Naval Conference (1921-1922), a disarmament regime established by nine maritime powers including the U.S. and Japan. However, during the early 1930s, the growing rivalry with the U.S., coupled with increased aggression in China, saw Japan increasingly isolated and heading to a collision course with the U.S. The U.S.-led economic blockade in 1941 compelled the Imperial Japan to launch the Pacific War (1941-1945), only to end up with disastrous results (Sajima and Tachikawa 2009: 1-5).

In the post-war period, Japan has re-emerged as an economic power house dependent upon international trade flowing along international sea lanes secured by the U.S. Navy. However, the Japanese identity as a sea power has never been forgotten, as illustrated by the growing significance of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF).<sup>7</sup> The application of sea power by the JMSDF remains controversial.<sup>8</sup> Japan has endeavored for decades to overcome legal, political, and normative constraints on the expansion of JMSDF including its maritime branch. Their progress has been steady and significant, albeit slow, in material terms.

On December 22, 2016, the Japanese Cabinet approved a record \$43.5 billion defense budget for Fiscal Year 2017, a 1.4 percent nominal increase from \$41.4 billion for 2016. About 25 percent of the total defense budget (\$10 billion) will be dedicated to the JMSDF, which will invest billions of dollars in new submarines, ships and stealth fighter aircraft. In particular, the

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<sup>7</sup> JMSDF's official mission is stated as follows: *In recognition of new security environment, the Defense Program Guidelines defines the role of the defense forces as "effective response to the new threats and diverse situations," "Proactive efforts to improve the international security environment," and "preparation for full-scale invasion," which is the primary role of defense forces, and Japan will efficiently maintain the necessary Maritime Self-Defense Forces posture to effectively carry out missions in each the areas* (<http://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/formal/english/about/mission/index.html>).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Easley (2017) assesses competing explanations about the post-war trajectory of Japan's defense posture by charting variation in military doctrine and capabilities. He finds that Japan has made incremental policy adjustments under domestic and international constraints, and is not aggressively remilitarizing. In contrast, Oros (2017) argues that especially since the rise of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Japan's military capabilities have resurged, leading to the multifaceted "security renaissance" in contemporary Japan.

planned acquisition of six submarines will be equipped with improved sensor technology. The defense expenditure represents five percent of overall government expenditure and less than one percent of Japan's gross domestic product. Nevertheless, Japan possesses one of the most sophisticated naval capabilities. Currently, Japan has 17 diesel-electric submarines and plans to increase the fleet to 22 by 2020. In comparison, China's submarine fleet consists of around 60 vessels, including nuclear-powered craft that can travel very long distances at high seas (Gady 2016; Panda 2017).

The expansion of the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) in the East China Sea is also remarkable.<sup>9</sup> The Japanese Cabinet separately approved an increase of JCG's 2017 budget to \$1.8 billion and is dedicated to devote 27 percent of its budget to enhancing patrols near the disputed islands. Compared with 45,500 personnel for the JMSDF, JCG has 13,422 and plans to field a fleet of 142 patrol vessels by the end of 2020 from 128 at the end of 2015. The JCG budget hike in turn sends an important signal to China (Gady 2016).<sup>10</sup>

### Action-reaction cycle between Japan and China

As noted above, the rise of maritime China offers a compelling reason for Japan to build up again its sea power muscle, departing from its dependence on the U.S. security umbrella. The 'cold politics and hot economics' (*seirei keinetsu* in Japanese or *zhengleng jingre* in Chinese) has become a defining feature of Sino-Japanese relations since they signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1978. This puzzling interaction is clearly illustrated in the unsettled sovereignty dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and the delimitation of maritime zones in the East China Sea. The competitive elements in the sovereignty and sovereign rights dispute include symbolic, political, economic, and historical significance, barring the two regional giants from giving way to the other side on the maritime issues. Both parties believe that a concession in the East China Sea could possibly jeopardize their claims elsewhere in the region (Koo 2009: 206).

China and Japan have become more hostile toward each other at sea during this decade. Their mutual grievances have been augmented by the unilateral exercise of sovereignty and sovereign rights in the disputed area: the Chinese trawler incident in September 2010, the nationalization of disputed islands by the Japanese government in September 2012, China's development activities in the gas fields that straddle maritime boundaries with Japan, to name

<sup>9</sup> In the East Asian Seas, coast guards are a vital instrument for the political and military leadership in conflict management and the maintenance of good order at sea and low tension. There is a growing need to address the challenges and possible conflict scenarios. However, the use of force by coast guards and para-military fishing vessels causes a heated debate about the legality of such activities in maritime East Asia. Special attention has been given to the Chinese para-military police in the South China Sea. For more details about China's maritime militia, see Cavas (2016) and Kennedy and Erickson (2016).

<sup>10</sup> In this regard, Samuels (2007/2008) argues: "now having reframed the nature of the threat Japan faces and having borrowed creatively from the U.S. model, they have found new traction by empowering the JCG...JCG modernization and expansion are being achieved without much objection from Japan's neighbors or from the domestic public. Although the JCG is not a second navy, it is already a fourth branch of the Japanese military. Japan's "new fighting power" is thus greater than the sum of its military parts."

just a few.

In particular, the diplomatic spat over the 2010 trawler incident was a wake-up call for Japanese nationalism against China. The incident caused by a Chinese fishing boat ramming a Japanese coastguard ship in the vicinity of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands abruptly ended by a release of the trawler's captain without pressing charges. It was considered China's diplomatic victory as Tokyo backed down to Beijing's retaliatory measures including bans on the export of rare earths and Chinese tourists to Japan. One Japanese commentator predicted that the 'Senkaku shock' would prove to be a much bigger blow to Japan than the 'Nixon shock' of 1971 when the U.S. president normalized relations with Beijing without consulting Japan (Pilling 2010).

Maritime disputes between China and Japan lie in an arena of foreign policy competition in which state elites—be they democratic or authoritarian—attempt to enhance their political legitimacy. While making efforts to remain in office, state elites are often tempted to resort to aggressive territorial policies and thus to capitalize on nationalist and irredentist sentiments (Heldt 2003). A window of opportunity to resolve complex maritime disputes between China and Japan is closing because of the tyranny of nationalism in both countries. The twin challenges of responding to nationalist sentiments and maintaining political legitimacy are major dilemmas for political leaders in both China and Japan.

Considering the identity politics of the East Asian seas, things will get worse before they get better in the years to come. The most dramatic example is Japan. As Japan lost its upper hand to China, it has accelerated its shift toward the right. The Japanese people's threat perception about China has catalyzed the ascent of such ultra-right-wing politicians as Shinzo Abe. As accumulated, collective experience, nationalist sentiments are reinforced by education or government propaganda. The Abe administration has taken a determined action to manipulate nationalist sentiments into a rightist direction in favor of his political legitimacy. It has also influenced nationalist groups, rightist intellectuals, and the conservative mass media. Determined to make Japan a normal state, and thus to revive and strengthen Japanese patriotism and national pride, PM Abe has launched a campaign to amend Japan's pacifist constitution and to beef up its offensive military capabilities (Easley 2017; Koo 2017; Oros 2017).<sup>11</sup>

Against this backdrop, Japan and the U.S. signed a new security treaty—called the Joint Defense Guidelines—in April 2015. The new guidelines pave the way for a more active participation of the JSDF in disaster relief, peacekeeping operations, missile defense and other military missions. The new agreement is the result of PM Abe's campaign to remove the constitutional barriers to the overseas operations of Japanese armed forces. The agreement

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<sup>11</sup> In the meantime, a bottom-up approach focuses on the role of civic activism on territorial disputes. For instance, Bukh (2016) analyzes the cases of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan and argues that civil society groups are playing an increasingly important role in shaping both discourses and policies related to the territorial disputes in their respective seas. According to him, civil society actors engaged in territorial disputes activism can be regarded as "identity entrepreneurs" to the extent that these actors necessarily seek certain social or economic benefits for themselves or the group they represent. He distinguishes between the motivation behind their entrepreneurial action and the broader social or structural effects of these actions. His focus is on the latter rather than on the former. He finds that the advocacy activities of the groups engaged in territorial disputes related activism in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have a structural effect of contributing to "cognitive security" of their respective national identities.

came as the U.S. and Japan seek for ways to address China's military modernization and its more aggressive territorial claims in the China Seas. Japan has made it clear that its armed forces will be more interventionist and closely aligned with the U.S. As a symbol of postwar pacifism, Japan has much to lose from strengthening its military presence. Notwithstanding, PM Abe won the relaxation of national-security laws in September 2015. As a result, the JSDF is now allowed to cooperate much more closely with allies on a greater range of missions (Barnes 2015; Jozuka 2016).

With the institutional clearance, Japan is now more than willing to extend its presence in the South China Sea to check and balance against China. Despite the lack of geographic proximity to the area, Japan clearly understands the significance of the region for its survival, both economic and strategic. Not only does Japan benefit from the unhindered freedom of navigation in the sea lanes, but it also wants to show its presence as a sea power to Southeast Asian countries who are concerned about China's growing military presence.

Japan is working hard with regional neighbors who are in territorial disputes with China. It has made soft loans to the Philippines and Vietnam for new patrol vessels and older destroyers. In February 2016, Japan and the Philippines signed a new defense agreement to allow the transfer of Japanese defense equipment and technology to the Philippines. The agreement allows the two countries to conduct joint research and development, and even joint production, of defense equipment and technology. Japan has similar defense agreements with the U.S. and Australia (de Castro 2016).<sup>12</sup>

Increased naval cooperation between Japan and India and revived talk of an Australia-Japan-India-U.S. nexus is another cause of alarm in Beijing. Maritime security under Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Japanese counterpart Abe has become one of the most visible areas of cooperation in the strategic partnership. A key recent development has been the inclusion of Japan as a regular participant in a joint naval exercise between the U.S. and Indian navies. India and Japan also conduct their own regular bilateral exercise with both parties having China in mind. PM Abe announced a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" and Modi welcomed Japan's deepening engagements under this strategy (Baruah 2016).

Japan's greater involvement in the South China Sea has drawn China's ire and strained bilateral relations.<sup>13</sup> China frequently sends surveillance vessels to the nearby sea areas and conducts military training, which in turn leads Japan to tighten its security in the area. In a vicious action-reaction cycle, tensions in the area persist. Greater uncertainties lie ahead as new and old sea power identities collide with each other at sea (Kang 2014; Nakano 2015; Koo 2017).

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<sup>12</sup> In September 2016, Japanese Defense Minister Tomomi Inada underscored the Japanese government's "resolve to protect (its) territorial integrity and sovereignty" and outlined three particular areas where Japan would continue to deepen its involvement in the South China Sea: JMSDF's joint training cruises with the U.S. Navy, bilateral and multilateral exercises with regional navies, and the provision of capacity building assistance to coastal states in Southeast Asia (Jozuka 2016; Panda 2016). In January 2017, PM Abe announced that Japan will provide six patrol vessels to Vietnam as a part of a fresh yen loan offer totaling ¥120 billion to Hanoi to help its maritime safety efforts amid China's expanding activities at sea. He also announced that Tokyo will provide Indonesia with yen loans worth ¥73.9 billion for irrigation and coastal protection projects (Japan Times 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Chinese Ambassador to Japan, Cheng Yonghua, told his Japanese counterparts that Japanese participation in U.S.-led freedom of navigation operations would cross a "red line" (Panda 2016).

## What lies ahead?

Revisionist states can change an existing territorial status quo by obtaining the contested territory. Given the essentially divisive and zero-sum nature of territorial issue, they are often tempted to achieve their goals by the use of force rather than by peaceful negotiations. Differences over territories certainly raise the risk of war. But, as history shows, even when territorial claims are highly competitive, not all of them escalate beyond a militarized threshold level. Instead, they catalyze a dangerous action-reaction cycle that may eventually lead to war (Kocs 1995; Senese and Vasquez 2003).

Contemporary sovereignty and sovereign rights disputes between Japan and China, and in East Asia more broadly persist while neither reaching peaceful settlement nor spiraling into a war. War, of course, is the last resort as demanded by the realist tradition. As fueled by identity politics, the aversion of some disputant countries to negotiated settlements is truly worrisome.

At the regional/structural level, the rise of China poses substantial challenges to U.S. hegemony. Backed by economic and military capabilities, China is about to fulfill a century-long dream of restoring its great power status. From this perspective, the U.S. struggle with China for mastery in Asia seems inevitable (Freidberg 2012; Mearsheimer 2014). Greater U.S. engagement in the regional seas would put Washington on a collision course with Beijing. Losing a hegemonic competition would be the worst nightmare for both parties (Koo 2017: 57).

The bottom line is that China is not a warmonger willing to risk the disruptions of war. At the same time, China is too big and too proud to comply without reservations with the Western-shaped norms and rules. For China, the choice is not necessarily between regaining the pristine glory of good old days and facing another national humiliation. There are more options to choose from in between. A pragmatic combination of realist and normative approaches can overcome the ‘China paradox.’ China, and its counterparts as well, can be deterred from drawing guns over minor and trivial disagreements in the China Seas and instead be induced to active participation in a regional maritime regime-building process.

Japan is certainly an important agent in the emerging regional order and yet its influence is mixed: On the one hand, it serves as a linchpin of a rules-based co-evolution of regional order; on the other hand, the resurgence of its maritime identity is making the already daunting task of stabilizing the new regional balance of power much more difficult.

The combination of Trump and Abe risks may prove to be particularly troublesome. To further his own security agenda, PM Abe has made full use of *gaiatsu*, or foreign pressure from the U.S. Intentionally or not, the former President Obama’s Pivot policy has boosted the role of Japan as a serious military player in the region. For Abe, the Pivot produced “a significant transformation of Japan’s grand strategy which well illustrates Japan’s commitment to the U.S.-led order” (Dobell 2016). With Donald Trump’s rise as an unpredictable security partner and China’s rise as an unforeseen security challenge, there is no going back for PM Abe. He is “striking while the iron is hot” and opportunities for the increased role of JSDF have opened up.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In his interview with the Washington Post, Andrew Oros said: “Trump is like the gift from heaven to Abe to push forward more on his security agenda...Abe’s goal on the security side is to show Trump that Japan is doing more. At home, Abe can sell his goals to a skeptical public by saying, “Trump is forcing us to do this; it’s not my fault.””

The resurgence of Japan as a sea power thus causes big uncertainties to a region already in trouble. As an island country, Japan has always struggled for maritime identity and a place in the region. From its earliest history, the sea was used by the Japanese both as a means of communication and as a practical aid for the consolidation of national power. For Japan, maritime engagement was not a matter of choice, but of survival. Yet, Japanese sea power has fluctuated over the past millenniums with a recurrence of peaks and troughs. For Japan, the search for maritime identity continues between two extremes: Returning to an isolated Japan and playing a major role in global affairs. Until Japan finds the right balance between these two extremes, emotional turmoil and accidental miscommunications are likely to delay the regional maritime regime-building process.

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