



# Japan's Relations with Russia and China

## *and the Implications for the U.S.-Japan Alliance*

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Published: May 16, 2018

Since 2013, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has made a number of decisive foreign and security policy changes aimed at strengthening Japan's alliance with the United States. At the same time, he has devoted considerable effort to improving relations with both President Vladimir Putin and President Xi Jinping, though in different areas and at different tempos. Given that relations between the United States, China, and Russia are replete with tensions, Abe's approach to certain policy issues may well result in clashes of Japanese and U.S. interests.

This commentary surveys Japan's foreign policies toward China and Russia, respectively, and examines the impact of these policies on the United States and the U.S.-Japan alliance. Because Japan and the United States share common fundamental goals and values, specific clashes in their interests should be taken as a sign of maturity in the bilateral relationship. Nonetheless, going forward, the two allies must engage in ongoing dialogue to ensure the preservation of mutual understanding and commitment that has sustained the alliance thus far.

### Japan's Foreign Policy toward China

China's regular intrusion into Japan's territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands (known as the Diaoyu Islands

in China) started in September 2012. Whatever China's historic and legal claim over the islands, violations of the territorial waters of land that Japan has administered since 1895 are not tolerated by the Japanese government. Abe has pursued a very power-oriented approach to China based on traditional *realpolitik* and prioritizing both deterrence and dialogue. Measures to strengthen Japan's deterrence power have included increasing the defense budget, establishing a new National Defense Program Outline with an emphasis on defense of the Senkaku Islands, creating the country's first-ever National Security Council, and advancing the concept of "proactive pacifism." Strengthening the alliance with the United States, as will be detailed below, naturally underpinned this new foreign policy direction.

Abe's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013 delayed progress on establishing a dialogue with China. Nevertheless, the first meeting between Prime Minister Abe and President Xi took place in November 2014 under the auspices of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit held in Beijing. A carefully prepared diplomatic document announced that the status quo on

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the Senkaku Islands and the Yasukuni Shrine would be maintained to ensure conditions for dialogue.<sup>1</sup> Since then, yearly dialogues between Abe and Xi have taken place, always under the auspices of multilateral international conferences.

In May 2017, Abe embarked on a new initiative to enhance dialogue and cooperation with China, particularly in the economic domain in light of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Abe's strategic calculation that, against the backdrop of China's continuous rise, it is in Japan's interests to maintain credible channels of communication could have underpinned his decision, but ironically it was President Donald Trump's economic policy emphasizing bilateralism at the expense of multilateralism that seems to have triggered Abe's interest in dialogue with China.<sup>2</sup>

For three years after Xi's announcement of BRI at the end of 2013, the Abe government distanced itself from the initiative, concentrating its efforts instead on substantiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), to which the administration, continuing Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda's policy, formerly acceded in March 2013. President Trump's decision in January 2017 to withdraw the United States from the agreement cast doubt on the credibility of efforts to achieve a regional multilateral trade structure. Precisely at this time, Abe had to face the reality that major Eurasian countries, including all European members of the G-7, were seriously interested in BRI, having already joined the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

Abe's change of policy started quietly with Liberal Democratic Party general secretary Toshihiro Nikai's trip to Beijing in May 2017, which was followed by a public speech by Abe in Tokyo in June, an Abe-Xi meeting during the G-20 summit in Hamburg in July, and, finally, one more Abe-Xi meeting in Danang in November. Many Japanese

newspapers described the Danang meeting as the beginning of a new relationship with China.<sup>3</sup>

## Japan's Foreign Policy toward Russia

When Abe returned to the post of prime minister in December 2012, his second-highest geopolitical priority after managing the relationship with China was to create friendly relations with other major East Asian countries. His objective was not to encircle China but to strengthen Japan's diplomatic power in the region where its fundamental national interests are most at stake. This constituted Japan's *raison d'état* for improving relations with Russia. Abe had also inherited this goal from his father, who in the years of perestroika had tried to forge a breakthrough with Mikhail Gorbachev in Japanese-Soviet relations. Abe has on many occasions made public his wish to achieve his father's unfulfilled dream of a major improvement in bilateral relations.

Abe moved fast to realize this vision in 2013, visiting Moscow in April with a large economic delegation, elevating immediately the status of defense cooperation with Russia, and subsequently seizing every opportunity to meet with Putin during multilateral meetings, culminating in Abe's attendance at the opening ceremony of the Sochi Olympics in February 2014. But the clash at Kiev's Maidan square in the latter part of that month and Russia's swift annexation of Crimea, followed by its stoking of a low-intensity war in eastern Ukraine, resulted in a decision to excommunicate Putin from the G-8 and introduce a series of economic sanctions. As one of the remaining G-7 countries, Japan had no choice but to support the vote. Although Japanese sanctions on Russia were relatively limited and late in their timing, peace treaty negotiations to resolve the dispute over the Northern Territories (known as the Kuril Islands in Russia) were practically suspended for two years.

<sup>1</sup> "Regarding Discussions toward Improving Japan-China Relations," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), November 7, 2014, [http://www.mofa.go.jp/a\\_o/c\\_m1/cn/page4e\\_000150.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/page4e_000150.html).

<sup>2</sup> See Kazuhiko Togo, "Torampu seikenkano ichinen" [One Year under President Trump], *Mondaito Kenkyuu* (2018): 25–26; See also Kazuhiko Togo, "Ittai Ichiro kosoto Nihongaiko" [The Belt and Road Initiative and Japan's Foreign Policy], *Kyoto Sangyo University, Bulletin of the Institute for World Affairs*, no. 33, March 2018, 61.

<sup>3</sup> Makiko Takita, "Nicchuu kankei kaizende icchi" [Japan and China Agree on Improving Relations], *Sankei Shimbun*, November 12, 2017; and Akiko Kato and Hiroyuki Asahi, "Nicchuu shunoukaidan kankei kaizen, omowakuni zure" [Japan-China Summit: Differing Thoughts on How to Improve Relations], *Mainichi Shimbun*, November 12, 2017.

Still, Abe diligently pursued his plan to achieve a breakthrough with Russia, and relations began to visibly improve in early 2016. The two leaders held an important meeting in Sochi in May of that year. With only interpreters present so as to prevent press leaks, Abe proposed an eight-point economic cooperation program. The momentum continued through their meetings in Vladivostok in September, at the APEC summit in Lima in November, and in Yamaguchi (Abe's hometown) and Tokyo in December.

In Yamaguchi, Abe and Putin agreed to take a “new approach” to territorial negotiations: first they would identify concrete areas of economic cooperation on the four islands, and only later, in the second stage, would they seek to resolve the sovereignty issue. The two leaders shared a determination to conclude a peace treaty, but Putin emphasized the necessity of expanding overall economic ties, as well as for Japan to heed Russia's security needs while Russia respects Japan's alliance with the United States. Despite continued negotiations to achieve these clearly defined objectives, 2017 passed without tangible outcomes.

## Impact on the United States and the U.S.-Japan Alliance

First, security tensions between Japan and China have resulted in substantially stronger U.S.-Japan ties, notably through Abe's pursuit of a revised interpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese constitution. Abe adopted the “Legislation for Peace and Security” through a Cabinet decision in 2014, a legislative bill in 2015, and parliamentary approval in 2016. As a result of this series of actions, Japan is now allowed to exercise the right of collective defense when an attack on an ally also results in substantial danger to Japan itself. This revised interpretation resolved, at least partially, a fundamental asymmetry in U.S.-Japan security relations: that the United States is obligated to defend Japan under Article 5 of their security treaty, but Japan is prohibited from defending the United States under Article 9 of the Japanese constitution. The heightened threat from China was an important trigger for these events.

Second, the U.S. government reproached Abe when he visited the Yasukuni Shrine in December 2013—an

action that obviously provoked China. With Sino-Japanese security tensions already rising, this kind of emotional provocation by Abe was unnecessary. The statement from the U.S. embassy in Tokyo that the U.S. government was “disappointed” may have persuaded Abe not to repeat the visit and return to a more balanced policy.<sup>4</sup>

Third, Trump's withdrawal from the TPP resulted in Abe's justifiable interest in BRI. Abe's new initiative to enhance dialogue with China, however, does not seem to have hurt U.S.-Japan economic, security, or other relations thus far.

With Russia, the situation is more complicated. Abe's strategic calculus is that because China is Japan's primary security concern, friendly relations with Russia are in Japan's geopolitical interest. Putin's annexation of Crimea, though “contrary to Ukrainian law and in violation of international law,” as the United States and other G-7 countries charged, is not directly targeted against Japan and could be seen somewhat differently from the perspective of geopolitics and history.<sup>5</sup> Abe's continued pursuit of improved relations with Russia after the Crimea incident in February 2014 must have irritated President Barack Obama. Nevertheless, Japan joined economic sanctions and worked to maintain a delicate balance between fulfilling its obligations as a member of the G-7 and improving relations with Russia.

With the election of President Trump, the situation became even more complex. At least to my knowledge, the Abe administration has not faced U.S. displeasure over Japan's improved ties with Russia, probably due to Trump's preference for increased engagement with Putin. On the other hand, political turmoil continues in Washington over Russian involvement in the 2016 U.S. election. If this turmoil develops into a concrete message to Japan to stay away from Russia, U.S.-Japan relations might experience new difficulties. For the moment, this is not the case, but observers and policymakers should watch the situation carefully.

<sup>4</sup> “Totsuzennosanpai gaikounikage Abeshusho Yasukunihe” [Abe's Sudden Visit to Yasukuni Casts Shadow on Foreign Policy], *Asahi Shimbun*, December 27, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> “G-7 Leaders Statement,” European Commission, Press Release, March 12, 2014, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_STATEMENT-14-65\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_STATEMENT-14-65_en.htm). For other perspectives on Russia's annexation of Crimea, see John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014; and Kazuhiko Togo, “A View from on Japan-Russia Relations in the Mid-2010s: Collapsing Framework, and a Way Forward,” in *Japan-Russia Relations: Implications for the U.S.-Japan Alliance*, ed. Gilbert Rozman (Washington, D.C.: Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, 2016), 24.

## Policy Implications

*Japan's relations with China and Russia through September 2021.* If the Chinese government's objective is to squeeze Japan militarily, corner it with a historical guilt campaign, and gain as much as possible economically, Japan has no other option than to resist on all fronts or sink. But if China's long-term objective is to find some kind of mutually acceptable status quo, then one possible outcome of Abe's current interests in BRI might be Japan joining the AIIB. The improvement of relations and opening of more reliable dialogue channels around BRI and AIIB, however, do not mean that the issues between the two countries can be resolved easily. While the direction of China's long-term policy is hard to discern, Japan should be focused on addressing its own national interests. Given a choice between "all or nothing" relations with China and relations with "gradual improvement" that better fit Japanese national interests, sensible leadership would prefer the latter course.

On the Senkaku Islands, the "new status quo" asserted by China is unacceptable to Japan, and thus far no mutually acceptable alternatives have been proposed. Beginning in the 1980s, historical disputes seemed to be focused mainly on the Yasukuni Shrine, but since around 2010 they have expanded to other issues such as the opening of the Center for the Tokyo Trial Studies in Shanghai Jiao Tong University in 2011, UNESCO's inscription of Nanjing massacre documents in its Memory of the World Register in 2015, and the opening of the Comfort Women History Museum at Shanghai Normal University in 2016. Even higher on Abe's diplomatic agenda may be bringing North Korea under control and achieving a breakthrough with Russia. Hopefully by September 2021, he may be able to resolve at least one of the many difficult issues in relations with China.

With Russia, Abe's objective may be to conclude a peace treaty during his tenure. The two sides first need to identify a mutually acceptable solution to the dispute over the Northern Territories/Kuril Islands. I see no reason why the two sides cannot find a solution based on the "two islands plus alpha" concept, meaning transfer of Habomai and Shikotan based on the 1956 Joint Declaration alongside some kind of agreement on Kunashiri and Etorofu that is acceptable to both countries. Second, the two sides need

to agree on concrete economic cooperation projects, on the basis of which Putin might then persuade the Russian people that cooperation with Japan is meritorious for Russia. Third, Putin has made it clear that while he understands the importance of the U.S.-Japan alliance, he expects that Russia's security interests will also be respected. What this really means needs to be clarified, but so long as Japan and Russia are prepared to respect each other's fundamental security position in the current international balance of power, it is hard to imagine that they cannot find a mutually agreeable balancing point.

*The United States and the U.S.-Japan alliance.* With regard to Sino-Japanese relations, if China continues to pressure Japan on all fronts, Japan will be pushed to strengthen its alliance with the United States. However, if China utilizes a longer-term strategy and tries to find some balancing point with Japan on geopolitics and geoeconomics, Japan could make policy choices that the United States would view with reservations—such as joining the AIIB. At this point in time, the only recommendation I can offer to Japan and the United States is that they thoroughly explain to one another their policy intentions and agree on a mutually acceptable position.

What would be the impact on the U.S.-Japan alliance should Abe reach some compromise with China on the Senkaku Islands, or even on the Yasukuni Shrine? Naturally, the answer depends on the exact terms of the compromise, but it is difficult to imagine the United States objecting to any solution to these historical issues, as their implications are primarily bilateral.

With regard to Japan-Russia relations, it is also unlikely that the United States would object to a settlement of the territorial dispute. Greater complications might arise, however, should Japan and Russia cooperate on economic projects that they see as conducive to their national interests but that the United States finds objectionable. The same goes for security approaches that both might consider to be in harmony with their national interests—though direct security cooperation is likely to be very limited. As with Sino-Japanese relations, the only recommendation I can currently make is for Japan and the United States to discuss

their policy preferences in detail and come to an agreement on scenarios that they both would be willing to accept.

One hypothetical question can be raised here: how might U.S.-Japan relations be affected if further rapprochement between Russia and China makes the improvement of Japan's relations with these countries substantially difficult? In general, one should expect that joint antagonism by Russia and China toward Japan would naturally push Japan toward the United States—with one important exception. If Japan sees the cause of Sino-Russian antagonism as emerging from an unwarranted and unhelpful U.S. policy, then Japan's strategic calculus would become much more complex. For instance, suppose Japan is pressured by the United States not to join the AIIB and not to embark on an energy project with Russia that Japan considers justifiable. If Japan's acquiescence to U.S. preferences results in retaliatory policies from China and Russia in important policy areas, such as economics, security, or even historical memory, then Japan would find itself in a very undesirable strategic position.

## Conclusion

On the whole, regardless of what happens between Japan, China, and Russia, it does not seem likely that any outcome would seriously undermine U.S. interests or the U.S.-Japan alliance. Moreover, the rise of China has been so fast and powerful on all fronts that Japan still cannot properly gauge its implications. Because threat perceptions

concerning China's growing power are by far the major variable shaping Japan's foreign policy, and because Japan and the United States largely share common political values, most Japanese policies toward China should be compatible with U.S. interests. Nevertheless, caution is needed on the AIIB, particularly if Japan and the United States determine that they see the issue differently.

If Abe succeeds in achieving a breakthrough on the territorial dispute with Russia, this would not create direct problems for the United States. But closer economic relations, notably in the Russian Far East and eastern parts of Siberia, or certain kinds of security agreements between Japan and Russia might not be conducive to U.S. interests. As with Japanese foreign policy toward China, the major variable here is threat perceptions of Russian power by Japan and the United States.

In the areas where their national interests do not converge, Japan and the United States need to thoroughly explain to one another their policy preferences and decide on a position that is satisfactory to both sides' interests and to the stability of the alliance. A strong alliance presupposes a fundamental convergence of interests and values, but it does not assume that all specific issues will be met with harmonious positions between the two sides. Where the allies differ, they should discuss their differences and prospective solutions in a straightforward and mutually supportive manner. In this way, U.S.-Japan relations will hopefully see a steady increase in trust and transparency, even when the two allies' policies do not align in a specific case. ♦

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