

November 19, 2012

Relations with Japan: No Farewell to Hardline Positions

Axel Berkofsky^()*

While the international press did not cover China's foreign and security policies as priority issues on the agenda of Beijing's new leadership, China's incoming leadership under President Xi Jinping is nonetheless charged with the challenge to explain and formulate how Xi and his entourage are planning to deal with the country's allies and rivals in and beyond the region.

When speaking of rivals and strategic competitors, one country comes to mind immediately: Japan. Given the recent and ongoing controversy and diplomatic tensions centered around territorial disputes in the East China Sea-Tokyo and Beijing argue over sovereignty of the (since 1895) Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands (Diaoyu Islands in Chinese, Beijing insists)-relations and tensions with Japan will make it to the top of Xi's foreign policy agenda rather sooner than later. Even if the situation seemed to have calmed down since earlier this year the Japanese government bought some of the disputed islands from its private owners, the controversy is and will remain unresolved in the future: the Senkaku Islands are Japanese territory, Tokyo says, while Beijing insists that the same Diaoyu Islands are Chinese territory.

While Japan's lame duck government has just dissolved the parliament and called general elections for December 16, the last thing China's new political leadership will do on the territorial dispute is compromise. Doing that would immediately be interpreted as weakness and weak leadership amongst policymakers, the public and probably most importantly the military. While The People's Liberation Army does no longer have the influence and economic power it had until the 1990s (until it was obliged to terminate its very lucrative economic and business activities and became 'normal' armed forces with a budget distributed by the central government minus the possibility to raise funds through economic activities), it is still influential and vocal enough to strongly disapprove with China's political leadership appearing weak on Japan (and the US and Taiwan for that matter too). And there is no doubt that the military leadership would strongly oppose any policies that could be interpreted as China compromising on its national territory and integrity in the East China Sea. Consequently, anything but Xi Jinping sticking to the current policy of insisting that the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are Chinese territory on come what may basis would be a surprise.

Adopting hardline policies towards Japan-be it territorial disputes or controversies over the interpretation of World War II-is still the 'safest' Chinese option in times of diplomatic crisis.

However, the incoming leadership does not want to see relations with Japan get derailed too much and for too long either. According to a very recent Reuters poll, more than 40 percent of Japanese manufacturers with investments in China said they are in view of the current diplomatic bilateral

The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

() Axel Berkofsky, is Senior Associate Research Fellow, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale and Gianni Mazocchi Fellow at the University of Pavia.*

crisis looking at India, Indonesia and Vietnam as alternative countries to manufacture and invest in in the years ahead.

In sum China's incoming president Xi will find himself under pressure not to appear weak or too soft on Japan, even if hard-line positions on territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas usually turn out to be counterproductive: China is-at least as far as its close and distant neighbors in the region are concerned- the security bully in the region throwing stones while sitting in a house of glass.

La ricerca ISPI analizza le dinamiche politiche, strategiche ed economiche del sistema internazionale con il duplice obiettivo di informare e di orientare le scelte di policy.

I risultati della ricerca vengono divulgati attraverso pubblicazioni ed eventi, focalizzati su tematiche di particolare interesse per l'Italia e le sue relazioni internazionali.

Le pubblicazioni online dell'ISPI sono realizzate anche grazie al sostegno della Fondazione Cariplo.

ISPI
Palazzo Clerici
Via Clerici, 5
I - 20121 Milano
www.ispionline.it

© ISPI 2012