



## A PRECARIOUS BALANCING: JAPAN CAUGHT IN US-CHINA TENSIONS

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Many uncertainties exist surrounding the courses that the world's two top economic powerhouses, the US and China, could take in the future. These uncertainties are significant, for they have the power to influence and shape both the foreign policy pursued by East Asian countries and universal international norms. Of the two, it is China's future course, which is perennially difficult to predict. Not only is China the first developing country to take on the status of a global power, it has also achieved strong economic growth as a non-democratic socialist country which operates according to so-called 'Chinese characteristics'.

Of course, that is not to say that predicting the US or the Trump administration's future movements is by any means easy. Its future course, too, is shrouded by many uncertainties. Firstly, for Japan, one of the most crucial issues is the possibility that the US will heavily tone down its security commitments in the West Pacific and East Asia region. The US-Japan security treaty serves as the basis for Japanese security policy. Furthermore, the US-Japanese security treaty is one of the critical components of the so-called 'hub and spokes' framework. As such, should the US elect to tone down its security commitments in any part of the region, it would have a significant knock-on effect on Japanese security policy. In order to prevent such an outcome, the Japanese have been heavily pushing the FOIP (Free and Open Indo-Pacific) strategy as a means by which to ensure that the US sticks to its commitment to the region.

Secondly, the US' management and control of technology (such as its new national security laws adopted in 2015), has, to an extent, discomfited Japan. It is possible that the US will require Japan and its other allies to accept the same level of regulation. Japan and East Asian countries have closed supply chains. If the US actively requires it, technological decoupling

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will advance apace and will result in the emergence of two different technological camps in the world. Japan has to prevent the emergence of such a scenario by cooperating with the EU, ASEAN and others.

### **A CAREFUL BALANCING ACT BETWEEN THE US AND CHINA**

In 2018, the US' China policy changed drastically. Most of its politicians, officials, and intellectuals — be they conservative or liberal — criticised China in various ways; namely, its human rights violations, its political system, its tariffs, its technology, and its violations of intellectual property rights. US Vice President Mike Pence's speech served as an instantiation of these critical voices which were resounding out of Washington. Many interpretations of Pence's speech exist. Some have interpreted it as an indication that a new 'cold war' has begun to be waged. Some saw it as an indication that the US and China had begun to dissociate themselves from one another actively. Some have seen it as an indicator of the end of an engagement policy, and, in other words, the start of a US disengagement policy. Meanwhile, others have interpreted it as the beginning of the formation of a 'hard' engagement policy. While some form of consensus does exist vis-à-vis China in Washington circles, this consensus is heavily outweighed by a wide-range of differing interpretations and perspectives on the country and the view that China is taking an aggressive stance.

From the Chinese point of view, there are two Americas: Pence's and Trump's. Pence's pursues a policy of comprehensively criticising China. Trump's seeks to negotiate, albeit according to certain conditions.

The increasing levels of hostility between the US and China, and, furthermore, the uncertainties which shroud the two

countries' futures, are crucial to understanding the shifts which occurred in Sino-Japanese relations in 2018. Indeed, as tensions have mounted between the US and China, Japan has had to play a careful balancing act. Japanese national security depends on the US-Japanese security treaty. At the same time, its economy is also heavily reliant on the Chinese market and the many closed supply chains it enjoys with Chinese industries.

In 2018, especially in the November-December period, a number of Japanese companies faced the threat of decreasing exports when trading quotas were imposed upon China by the US as a result of their trade confrontation. A decrease in China-US trade is a significant risk for some Japanese companies. So much so, in fact, that Japanese industries have called upon the Japanese government to help improve relations between the two sides.

### **ABE'S VISIT TO CHINA**

In 2018, Japan succeeded in improving its relationship with China, with reciprocal visits made by respective heads of state. In May, Prime Minister Li Keqiang visited Japan to take part in a trilateral meeting between Japan, China and South Korea. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited China in October. However, it is important to note that this resumption in leader-to-leader exchange indicated that the so-called 'improvement' in the two countries' relations merely constituted an attempt to move the relationship out of negative territory and return it to a more neutral footing. While Japan and China began many negotiations regarding the control and management of emergencies in the East China Sea, and also resumed their dialogue on the joint development of resources in the East China Sea, territorial and historical issues were put aside at meetings between heads of state. Furthermore, while the number of Chinese public vessels entering the territorial and



neighbouring waters of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands decreased to some extent in 2018, the number began to rise once again from January 2019.

As for the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in 2017 Abe revised his views on the project. Ahead of the 'Future of Asia' meeting in June 2017, the Japanese government articulated several reasons why it could not partake in China's respective BRI and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) projects. However, in June 2017, Abe suddenly proposed a number of conditions which, if met, would enable the BRI to enjoy Japanese backing. Conversely, these conditions effectively constituted the same reasons why Japan would not agree to support the BRI in the first place. During Li Keqiang's visit to Japan in May 2018, Abe summarised these conditions in the following four points: 1) openness; 2) transparency; 3) economic efficiency; and 4) financial soundness. These four conditions were also proposed at meetings between Abe and President Xi Jinping. While Chinese leaders and officials did not agree with the conditions, they did not outright reject them. Though Japan and China have yet to reach a consensus on these conditions, [agreements on 52 new national and private level cooperative projects](#) in third countries were concluded between the two sides.

By pure happenstance, Abe's visit to China took place just after Pence's speech. Before his visit, Japan announced the end of technological cooperation with China and the launch of a new dialogue on intellectual property rights with the country. Japan appears to have employed these strategies as a means by which to placate the US. Furthermore, the fact that Japan proposed the acceptance by China of four conditions as a necessary premise for future bilateral cooperation demonstrated that Japan was not willing to engage with China unless its stance was adequately heard. It is nevertheless ironic how

Abe's China policy is, by virtue of its content, sympathetic to the liberal camp in Washington which stresses the importance of engagement with China.

### **PUBLIC OPINION IN JAPAN AND CHINA**

Public opinion is the ultimate obstacle to future improvements in relations between China and Japan. As a public poll carried out by the Japanese cabinet office indicated, more than 80% of Japanese possess a negative image of China. In 2017, a Chinese poll on the number of Chinese who possess a negative image of Japan showed the same percentage figure as that of the Japanese poll. Japan's administration needs to pay attention to public opinion on China, and the Chinese government cannot neglect the existence of negative public opinion on Japan amongst its populace.

However, in 2018, a drastic shift could be observed in the Chinese data. According to a [2018 poll by the NPO Genron](#), positive perceptions on Japan increased from 31% to 42%. In Japan, however, the percentage of the population who answered that they had a negative image on China did not shift all that much, decreasing only slightly from 88% to 86%. Interpreting the meaning behind percentage shifts in the Chinese context is difficult, as polls in China are often influenced by the Chinese authorities. In the very least, however, this percentage shift demonstrates that the Chinese population is, to some extent, keen to see the government improve relations with Japan.

At the June meeting of the Chinese Central Foreign Affairs Commission, under mounting pressure from the US, a new foreign policy which emphasised relations with the US was decided upon. As a result of this, other foreign policy issues including China's Japan policy was put to one side. If the confrontation between China and the US continues for a



substantial period, it will undoubtedly influence how China and in its foreign policy, interacts and engages with other non-US countries including Japan. If the confrontation continues to escalate, Japan will be compelled to choose sides. Such a scenario will constitute a zero-sum game. As such, Japan has

to ensure that the US sticks to its security commitments in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific, and simultaneously make strides to try and prevent the decoupling of the economy and technology between the US and China.

*This article was translated into English by Thomas Barrett*