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## War in the East China Sea?

By: PETER LEE

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China's PRC regime has been preparing for escalating confrontation with Japan if Tokyo decided it really wanted to test the commitment of the United States to back it in the crisis over the Senkaku/Daioyutai Islands.

Showing Japan the undesirability of openly aligning with the United States as the U.S. pivots into Asia—instead of giving some lip service at least to PRC interests and priorities—is pretty close to an existential issue for the PRC.

And the PRC knows that the U.S. appetite for giving Japan military support over the Senkakus/Diaoyutai is extremely limited, despite the brave talk of the U.S. defense appropriations bill. If an incident had occurred between the PRC and Japanese ships and planes jostling around the islands, the U.S. would have been faced with the very difficult choice between exacerbating a crisis in Asia and admitting the limitations of the “pivot”, not only to Japan but to Vietnam, the Philippines, and, for that matter, everybody else.

So, if the Japanese forces had decided to engage in some pushback on the provocative PRC actions around the Senkaku/Diaoyutai, the PRC would have made sure that things got pretty ugly pretty quick.

And if the PRC wanted to try to strangle the pivot in its cradle, they might have rolled the dice, provoked an incident, and let the crisis escalate.

However, it seems that the PRC is thankfully willing to let the crisis de-escalate for now.

Ex-Prime Minister Hatoyama—on whose watch the disastrous decision to nationalize some of the Senkaku/Daioyutai Islands occurred—is paying a visit to China.

His visit to the memorial to victims of the Nanjing Massacre was front page news in Chinese state media, especially since he marked his visit with the sort of respectful bow that is usually associated with the obeisance paid to Japanese war dead by Japanese prime ministers. For good measure, Xinhua also photographed Mr. Hatoyama observing a photograph of a Japanese soldier preparing to decapitate a Chinese prisoner.

The Xinhua headline read: Former Japan's PM Apologizes for War Crimes in China.

Not by accident, this relatively abject episode (which, if carried out by a current or former United States leader would have been excoriated as a capitulationist apology tour) occurred while current Prime Minister Abe was preoccupying the Japanese media with his largely symbolic defiance tour of Southeast Asia, ostensibly including an unwelcome security component but more concretely advertising the benefit to all concerned of economic ties that are not dependent on the pleasure of the PRC.

But, to the PRC at least, the willingness of Japan to make some kind of concession to cool things down is noted and, thankfully, welcome.

Xinhua also ran a report on a meeting between Hatoyama and Jia Qinglin, at which nice and conciliatory words were spoken:

Top political advisor Jia Qinglin said Wednesday that China and Japan should resolve the Diaoyu Islands dispute through dialogue and consultation.

“The two sides should handle the Diaoyu Islands dispute properly in order to ensure that bilateral relations remain on a track of healthy and stable development,” said Jia, chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), while meeting with former Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama.

Jia said cooperation between China and Japan will serve the fundamental interests of both sides, as well as the region and the international community.

China attaches importance to its ties with Japan and will continue to work to develop bilateral relations in accordance with previous agreements, Jia said.

In meetings with the U.S. team of superpundits and retired diplomats (i.e. the Nye/Steinberg/Armitage/Hadley mission to Japan and PRC in October 2011 that attempted to apply U.S. good offices to resolve the dispute—something that the PRC, whose entire purpose in milking the Senkaku/Diaoyutai crisis was to convince Japan of the conditional, equivocal, and partial character of US support embodied in the pivot, had no interest in encouraging), the PRC

reportedly shifted the frame away from China's eternal claim to the islands to the seemingly tangential question of Japan trying to shed the moral and diplomatic burden of World War II.

Peter Ennis interviewed Professor Nye and posted the transcript on his blog, Japan Dispatch. In one exchange:

*DISPATCH JAPAN: Is there a broader strategy underlying China's approach to the Senkakus, or is a Japan-China dynamic primarily at work?*

NYE: Chinese regard Japan as having changed the status quo by having the central government purchase the islands from the private owner. China has not accepted Prime Minister Noda's public explanation that he took that step to prevent Governor Ishihara from having the Tokyo municipality purchase the islands, which could have caused mischief.

The Chinese think there is a large plan by Japan to erode what they call "the outcome" of World War II. I don't know how much of that is pure rhetoric, or represents the real thinking in China. But that is what senior Chinese say.

*DISPATCH JAPAN: What is your assessment? Is it rhetoric, or real thinking?*

NYE: I think a lot of Chinese really believe that Japan is trying to erode the status quo. I think others are using that line in an effort to create a wedge between the US and Japan.

Shifting the focus to the big question of World War II is a better way of improving relations than arguing over the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands. The island dispute is zero sum: either they are China's or Japan's.

On the other hand, fortunately, a significant portion of Japan elite opinion can still agree with the PRC that World War II was a bad thing. A climbdown for Japan is easier and allows the PRC to claim a moral victory.

Mr. Hatoyama's participation in the Nanjing shaming ceremony will hopefully be enough to smooth things over for now:

Hatoyama nodded as Zhu Chengshan, the memorial's president, told him that it is an undeniable fact, as stated in the verdicts of the Tokyo and Nanjing martial courts, that Japanese invaders killed more than 300,000 people in Nanjing.

"The Japanese government had made it clear when signing the Treaty of San Francisco 1951 that it accepted the verdicts of the Far Eastern International Military Court of Justice and others verdicts regarding its war crimes," Zhu said.

It will be interesting to see how the Japanese media covers Hatoyama's visit.

Whether or not the de-escalation of the crisis in Japan-China relations through Mr. Hatoyama's visit represents Japan's abandonment of its ideas of shedding the incubus of World War II and

entering the brave new world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where Japan jettisons its peacetime constitution, rebrands its “self defence forces” as a conventional military and, maybe assembles a few atomic bombs from its large stash of plutonium and mounts them on its space rockets is an open question.

Actually, it’s really not an open question.

Japan will probably draw the conclusion that China that Chinese desire to confront and humiliate Japan will remain, and will muscle up in response.

Ironically, this may be the endgame that the PRC was looking for.

If Japan continues with its accelerated military investment and practices an even more independent security policy, the credibility of the United States—safe to say, the only military power the PRC really cares about—as the guarantor of security in East Asia, specifically as the force restraining Japanese rearmament, is eroded.

The key takeaway from the Senkaku/Daiyutai crisis is that the Japanese government, in large response to domestic imperatives, undertook a regional security adventure without the enthusiastic support of the United States. China escalated the crisis, rejected US mediation, and forced Japan to address the situation bilaterally, at first through the deployment of its military forces and now diplomatically.

The crisis revealed a small but significant chink of daylight between Japan and the United States.

That makes it likely that the PRC will be happy to return to the fraught issue of the islands again, whenever it wants to reveal and encourage the centripetal forces implicit in the US pivot to Asia.